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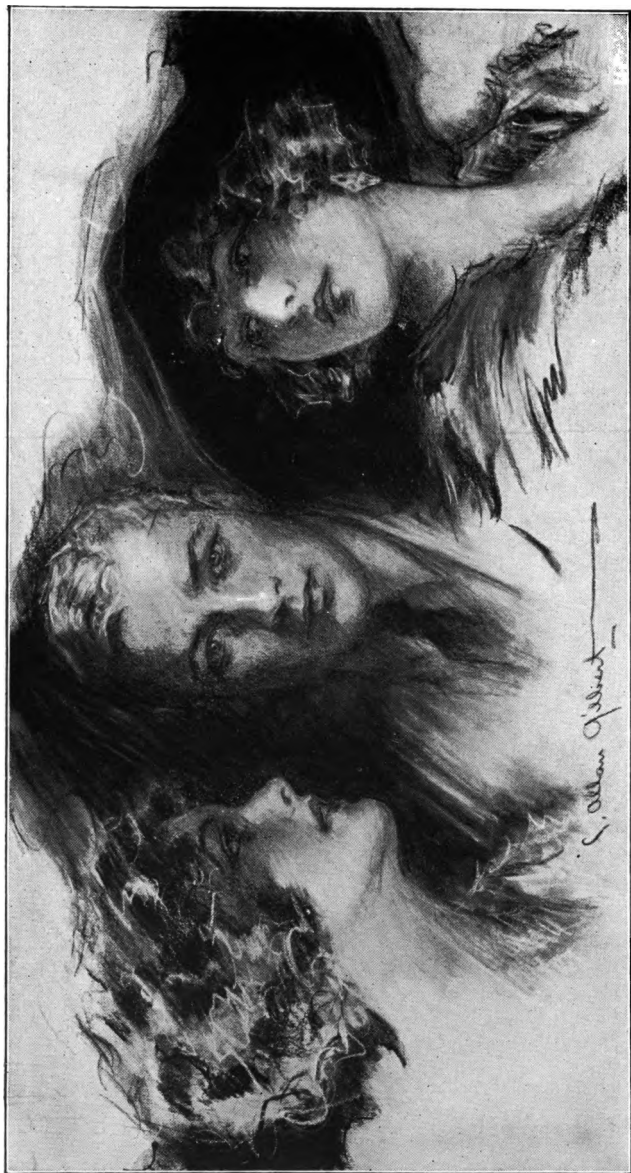
The
HIDDEN ROAD

Wadsworth Camp



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THE HIDDEN ROAD



"Eleanor Grantley slipped originally into Nicholas's vision as a vexation . . . at the moment his mind was crowded by a star essentially fixed, the brilliant Janet Ashmead."

THE HIDDEN ROAD

BY WADSWORTH CAMP

AUTHOR OF
"The Guarded Heights"



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THE HIDDEN ROAD

THE HIDDEN ROAD

I

THE WAYFARERS

ELEANOR GRANTLEY slipped originally into Nicolas Aldrich's vision as a vexation, into some other people's as an exciting spectacle, into no one's as a personality easy to understand.

"She makes one think of a stray star, Nick," an inveterate maker of phrases suggested once, "not wholly on account of that amazing hair, which glows without flame; rather because she streaks suddenly from nowhere, and will go who knows whither? Back to the great void?"

Naturally; such eccentric bodies invariably did; yet the circumstances that arranged his first glimpse of her aroused young Aldrich to a decided, if apparently detached, interest in her orbit. For at the moment his mind was crowded by a very different person, a star essentially fixed, the brilliant Janet Ashmead, with whom long ago he had hovered on the edge of a heady sentimentality. Now, after six years of Paris studios, war, and relief work, he was back home and, in response to Mrs. Ashmead's informal invitation for dinner, approached a renewal of that companionship with Janet which had survived during his absence only through a random, self-conscious, but treasured correspondence.

Instead of hastening, however, to this long-desired meeting he strolled slowly up through the park. During the twenty-four hours since his landing he had felt increase upon him a startled sense of being an alien in his own land, a stranger among his own

people. He experienced a tantalizing and nostalgic longing for the frank hunger, the bared emotions, the unaffected mutual helpfulness of the poor devils among whom he had for so long laboured. Would Janet seem as unfamiliar to him as the rest of New York? How far, indeed, had she outgrown the eighteen-year-old girl he had left? To what extent would his own transformation affect her? How abominably would the bad news his father had greeted him with last night colour their relations? His reluctance to face the answers cradled by the next few minutes was increased by a glimpse across the Avenue of the smug and extravagant Ashmead house.

He glanced at his watch. There was no hurry. He slipped into a dark arbour, and, because of his preoccupation and his nearness to the Ashmeads, achieved his first glimpse of the provocative Eleanor Grantley. A somewhat dramatic view it was, too, since he failed to realize at first that in his corner the shadows weaved an obliterating shroud. Sudden voices at the entrance, therefore, merely offered an annoyance. His solitude would be broken in upon, and by some Strephon and Chloe from the service rooms of one of the Avenue houses or the poorer quarters to the east. All at once, in spite of himself, he was aroused by a girl who interrupted a man's coarsely phrased anxiety to lead her into the impulsive shadows of this retreat; for her voice was exceptionally musical, and it was simple for Nicolas to guess of what emotions its warm harmonies were built—a feminine desire to approach with a strong guide unexperienced places; a shrinking from the mysteries instinctively sensed there; the pity, nearly maternal, of a woman for a man she has to hurt. Whatever he was, she, clearly, had managed an education of a sort; longing, perhaps, for something better than that uncouth fellow ever could offer her.

Nicolas sighed. Here at least in New York was frank hunger and bared emotion. He might as well move on and leave the pair a clear field for a probable proposal, an almost certain refusal, a succession of futile and bitter arguments.

On the other hand, why should he bother? To him these people weren't of the slightest importance; they belonged quite

to another world. The arbour was his as thoroughly as theirs, and he had priority of possession. When they entered and saw him they could either move on or modulate their ardour to his presence. He had another five minutes—ten—before he need cross to the house where Janet waited, grown into an inevitable and disturbing womanhood.

He saw momentarily the wide bulk of a man in the arbour entrance, then the silhouette of a woman, tall and slender. Her wraith-like figure sank on a portion of the bench where some light filtered through the foliage, which, while it left her face in shadow, touched her hair with a suggestion of dull fire. The man's black bulk slouched down beside her.

Nicolas stared. They were going to remain in spite of him. Funny people! People from another world! Once more he tried to forecast that meeting with Janet which he wished to put off until the last moment.

"Glad I dropped in to-night, Eleanor. Your father had just come, hadn't he? Don't want to poke my nose into other people's business, but I could see you and your mother didn't expect him, and if he carried any presents he must have mortgaged his good clothes to buy them. Own up, Eleanor. How long since the old party came holding out a tin cup?"

The girl's musical voice answered the other half angrily.

"I hadn't seen him for ten years, since I was a child, when he lost his money, and Mother and I came to New York. His coming to-night's a shock. Can't you see it—it's a shock, John. I can't talk about it. I—I don't want to go back, but I can't stay here."

Nicolas yawned. These people would let him think only of their own little drama, starkly real enough, but certainly of no interest to him since he would never see or hear of them again.

He sat up, startled, wide awake. What the devil had that fellow said?

"I only want to look after you, Eleanor. I only want you to know I'd take care of anybody that got on your nerves. Why—why——"

And, as if he had sought and found the ultimate boast:

"I wouldn't stop even at young Harold Ashmead if he got fresh."

Her laughter held no mirth.

"What are you talking about? I've scarcely seen him."

"All the better, because he's a gay rooster, and there are few enough men could look at you without wanting to get fresh."

Nicolas relaxed. Not much of a coincidence, after all, in view of the adjacence of the arbour to the Ashmead house! At a hazard this fellow would be one of the Ashmead chauffeurs, at his gallantry in the nearest friendly spot. At least Nicolas didn't care to hear any more; but into a yellow light ray he saw the girl's hands rise, exposed, because of the surrounding darkness, as by a spotlight; the pliant, fragile fingers clasping and unclasping; and on one he noticed a silver serpentine ring whose single ruby flashed red. The man's great hand clasped those long fingers, and the gleam of the ruby died.

Nicolas closed his ears to the fellow's amorous outpourings, his pleadings for a definite understanding, an eventual marriage. He sat back in his corner, flushed and angry. That brilliant light on the girl's hands had, by its contrast, told him just why his presence had not disturbed his companions of the arbour: because they had never known of it. He was about to rise and disclose himself when the girl spared him the trouble. She sprang up, freeing her hands.

"You shan't touch me that way!"

Her slender silhouette glided through the entrance, the man's bulk pursuing. His tones came back, hoarse with a threat.

"You got to give me an answer. You can't make a fool out of me."

Her voice dwindled as she receded.

"You'll let me think—until we get home, John. I'll tell you—then."

Nicolas couldn't help smiling. He hoped the girl called Eleanor, when she got home, wouldn't have any trouble with the man named John; for there was no doubt in his mind of the answer she would give him.

Curiously enough the encounter, perhaps because of its coarse

realism, had put him more at ease. He left the park, eluded the traffic of the Avenue, and, across a deep vestibule, with a sort of fascination watched a heavy door, screened by blue hangings, swing slowly back. He smiled at the old servant.

"This seems very familiar, Grayson. You've forgotten me?"

The man's face broke into a wrinkled smile.

"Never, Mr. Aldrich. But it's all of seven years since you stood there, sir."

"Not quite."

Nicolas walked past, had one foot in the hall, in fact, when he drew back, startled, only half inclined to believe the evidence of his ears.

"Did you hear that, Grayson?"

The man stared.

"A scream!"

Nicolas nodded. A woman's scream, near at hand; a call for help, if he knew anything about fear.

He sprang to the sidewalk, and glanced eagerly up and down the street. He saw a man with bowed head running slowly east. Another stood in front of the Ashmead garage, his hands on his hips, watching the retreating figure. As Nicolas hurried toward him, this man shrugged his shoulders and started for the garage. Nicolas paused. Someone had been quicker than he. The affair, if it had ever possessed significance, was quite finished. He returned to the house, and while Grayson took his hat and coat explained amusedly what he had seen. Mr. Ashmead came to the hall, drawn by his voice, welcoming him with a pronounced cordiality, reciting with his judicial manner the phrases proper to such a greeting. He, with the rest of the world, had changed. His face was more florid than it had been six years ago, and his body perceptibly stouter. Nicolas wondered if he would see Janet's grandfather, and he smiled as he remembered old Beau Ashmead.

"I hope your father is well," he said. "At least I haven't heard any bad news of him."

Mr. Ashmead laughed shortly.

"Give you my word, Nick, he grows younger. You can't see

for yourself to-night. He has his own social interests, but he's about the office a good deal. By the way, if you care to run down in the morning, Hal or I will go over your securities with you. I suppose you'd like to learn just where you stand."

Of course Mr. Ashmead knew all about Mr. Aldrich's disadvantageous investments. Perhaps, in spite of Mrs. Ashmead's invitation, Nicolas would better have stayed away altogether until he knew exactly how he stood. Mr. Ashmead's cordiality, however, didn't diminish. Having let his hint drop, he grasped Nicolas by the arm and led him across the hall.

"Janet and the others are in here."

Nicolas entered, his mind still filled by the memory of an eighteen-year-old girl, dark-haired and feminine beyond the ordinary. Now across the room he faced a woman, and he paused as before a strange presence. She had, indeed, altered more than he would have thought possible, retaining of the old Janet scarcely more than enough to assure him of her identity. Above her evening gown her neck and shoulders dazzled. Her eyes had a discerning air that he could not recall, and she was unquestionably lovelier than she had promised in those far days to become. Her regular features were animated as she left a precise little man with a moustache to whom she had been talking, and hurried over. Nicolas felt cheated. It was as if in a moment, when his back had been turned, her transmutation from childhood to maturity had been miraculously accomplished.

"Nick! We thought you'd never have enough of being a hero."

He took her hand and returned its warm pressure, endeavouring to destroy his sensation of meeting a stranger.

"Don't laugh at me, Janet. How long it's been! Your mother——"

He went over and spoke to a portly and voluminous lady whose hair was an exact shade of gray, whose cheeks flushed quite healthily without the slightest variation. He felt more at ease, for Mrs. Ashmead hadn't altered at all.

"You're a bad boy, Nick, to have stayed away so long—nearly two years after the Armistice! It was silly."

She drew him closer.

"But now you're to let us see a lot of you. You understand? A lot!"

He thanked her and spoke to the others—a family gathering except for the precise little man and himself. Janet's cousins, Ethel and Sally Warden, had grown from long-legged childhood into self-conscious adolescence. Mrs. Ashmead had, indeed, been informal. He felt himself under inspection. The Ashmeads, certainly, had lost no time finding out what the years had done to him.

"Hello, Driggs!" he mumbled.

He had seen Harold Ashmead and Driggs Wandel that noon, and he had run across them a number of times in France, so that neither seemed strange to him.

"Where's Hal?" he asked.

"I left him," Mr. Ashmead said, "working furiously at the office. He has such lapses from indifference."

"I'm told he's among the most promising of young lawyers," Wandel drawled.

"Talking about me, Driggs?"

Harold Ashmead stepped from the hall. His mother looked up. Ethel Warden gave a cry.

"Listeners," Wandel was saying, "often hear better of themselves than they deserve. At least it isn't your ear that burns."

"Harold! What have you been up to?" Mr. Ashmead demanded.

Nicolas saw then that young Ashmead's necktie was awry, and that one cheek was quite noticeably discoloured. Janet walked over and tapped the spot with her finger.

"Who landed there, Hal?"

He laughed. His handsome face was not at all concerned.

"Most extraordinary show! Romance, desperate deeds, daring rescues of terrified females in our very block! Tell you all about it. Take me a minute to change, Mother. Anybody starving, blow mess call now."

No one starved, nor was any one in a hurry. Most unseason-

able weather. Really too warm for the play, didn't Nick think? And Mrs. Ashmead was headachy, and Janet had some kind of a charitable meeting later; and whatever had Hal been up to? The answer would have to wait for him. Mr. Ashmead, with his manner of a man of vast affairs, filled in with a kindly interest in Nicolas's future.

"Maybe you'll take a vacation before settling down to something."

Nicolas shook his head. Of course it was well understood he would have to settle down.

"I shan't play," he answered shortly. "I'm anxious to get to work. New York makes me restless."

"Going into the Street?" Sally Warden asked.

"Why not the Planters?" Mrs. Ashmead suggested. "You and Lambert are friends, and George Morton?"

"I was a little ahead of him at Princeton," Nicolas answered. "Driggs tells me he's done great things."

"Didn't you," Wandel asked slowly, "start life with a halo of genius about your head? Have the war and relief work torn the paint brush permanently from your hand and the soiled smock from your shoulders?"

Nicolas winced.

"I hope not, Driggs. I don't know. Give me time to turn around."

"By all means," Wandel said, "but I picture you ending with your face to the market. You've come home, Nick, to a materialistic land."

Perhaps, Nicolas reflected, that was why he felt an alien even among these people who had once been his closest friends. They impressed him as verging on hardness, as enmeshed in really unimportant threads of shallow and ostentatious interests, as people without a vision.

He was glad when Hal hurried in, neat and quite himself, except for his cheek, which still showed some discolouration. Clearly his adventure, whatever its nature, had given him a thrill of excitement, an expansion of soul. At the commencement of dinner he tried to satisfy their curiosity.

"Got to confess, Dad," he laughed, "I found the office discouraging, and left not a great while after you. Telephoned Halloran to send one of the men down to the Fourteenth Street subway station with my runabout. I dropped in at the club, kept the car, and shipped him home. That's why I was so beastly late, Mother. Long rubber. But I felt I needed the money, and had better stick it out. You see vice is its own reward. If I hadn't gambled late I'd have had no story."

He sipped at his wine, enjoying the others' suspense.

"Drove myself home," he went on, "and Halloran let me in the garage. I chatted with him for a few minutes. Was just about to hustle in, though, when I heard a woman scream at the top of her lungs, and I thought: 'Ha! The evening murder!'"

Nicolas measured the past few minutes. It fitted perfectly. Hal and he had heard the same cry. It struck him as curious that he should respond to an instinct not to piece in his own experience.

"Go on," was all he said.

"It brought me up," Hal continued, "because we're a peaceful neighbourhood, and the woman was either on or near our property; and there was no doubt. She wanted help."

"I see," Wandel said. "The cry sounded involuntary."

"Just so, Driggs."

Janet smiled vindictively, indicating her brother's bruised cheek.

"Did you find, chivalrous Hal, that women sometimes want help least when they cry loudest?"

Nicolas glanced at her, surprised. Undoubtedly she had attained a habit of discernment of which she hadn't dreamed six years ago.

"I was wanted right enough," Hal answered. "I went through the open door like a shot. Only light was from the garage door and the corner lamp. City ought to do us better, Dad. Didn't see anybody at first, but it was all shadow by the door of the entry that goes to the rooms over the garage. I guessed she must be there, either in the doorway or the entry,

so I ran over, and made out a big fellow just inside with his arms around a slender girl who was fighting him. Too dark to see a face."

Absent-mindedly Nicolas crumbled some bread, his dinner neglected. The Warden girls awaited breathlessly the dénouement. Janet disapproved.

"Dashing into the private affairs of poor old Halloran and his cronies!"

Her father and mother were inclined to agree with her. They listened, frowning, apprehensive.

"Rare good thing I went," Hal defended himself. "I caught the fellow by the shoulder—he was all of my size—and swung him away from the girl, asking very politely, I do assure you, fond mother: 'What the devil goes on here? What's the name of the play?'"

He tapped his cheek.

"Read the answer. Careless. What, Nick, old strong man?"

"At least unscientific," Nicolas smiled, "but you probably hit back."

"Right. On the chin with my little fist, and with my foot on—children, on that part of the anatomy which is pleasantest to the angry foot. As we used to say in the army, I accomplished my mission. He spun across the sidewalk."

"And he didn't come back and ask for more?" Wandel asked.

The animation left Hal's face. His eyes narrowed. He shook his head.

"But I'd lay a lot, Driggs, he would have if it hadn't been for old Halloran."

"For Halloran!" his father echoed sharply.

"Exactly. Halloran had, naturally, followed me from the garage, and he caught this chap as he was going down, and what he said to him I don't know, or whether he said anything at all; but the man ran off, not rapidly; in a sullen fashion, as if he planned to return in his own good time; and Halloran stood looking after him, as if to make sure he went."

"You mean, Harold," Mr. Ashmead said, "you got the impression Halloran knew the man and warned him."

"You think," Mrs. Ashmead asked uneasily, "it might have been one of our men—John or Ralph?"

Nicolas glanced up, his discomfort increasing. The girl of the arbour had called her swain "John." They had had just time to return to the garage; for her to give him his answer, which Nicolas himself had forecasted as a refusal. It fitted.

"I tell you I didn't see his face," Hal said irritably. "Never really got a good look at his figure. It was too dark, and I was excited, and it all happened in a wink. I did think of that, and it occurred to me it would be a bit awkward."

Nicolas spoke quietly.

"Why should Halloran's action suggest a previous acquaintance? I mean, he'd take a hand in the fight, wouldn't he? He'd be bound to see the defeated away—sort of a flank guard for you, Hal."

The theory furnished no antidote for Mr. Ashmead's doubt.

"It isn't our province, Harold," he said thoughtfully, "to interfere in the domestic or sentimental affairs of our employees."

He glanced at the two quiet men who tip-toed about the table. They could be trusted to report all that had been said to Halloran.

Although Nicolas found Mr. Ashmead's position indefensible as a rule, there might be, in view of the encounter in the arbour, a very sound exception here.

"But when a girl calls out for help!" Hal was protesting, "you can't very well leave her in the hands of a brute."

"You'll find," Janet said, "that such girls are pretty well capable of taking care of themselves."

Nicolas glanced uneasily at her again. Sally Warden flushed.

"How do you know, Janet?"

Janet shrugged her gleaming shoulders.

"It might be possible to guess who this girl is."

"Feminine intuition, my dear Sally," Wandel offered, "ought to be easily comprehensible to all females."

"Then why did she scream?" Sally cried defiantly.

"What did she say?" Ethel asked Hal.

His voice, attempting an imitation, became thin and high.

"Thank you. Oh, thank you."

"Is that all?"

Hal shook his head.

"She cried. Burst into tears. Isn't that the way to put it, Driggs?"

"It might be illuminating," Wandel suggested, "if one knew whether she burst or melted."

"Burst, by all means."

"Then she needed you," Wandel decided, "and it's a good thing, Janet, that he went."

"Who do you think it was, Janet?" Ethel Warden wanted to know.

"You might ask the gallant Hal," Janet replied dryly.

"The real romance! The real mystery!" he cried. "I asked her, and she flatly refused to tell me. 'It makes no difference,' she said. Then she started to draw back into the dark hall, and I had an idea."

He glanced at his sister.

"Brilliant!" she mocked him.

"I'd been in action," he excused himself, "but I felt sure then, and I faced her with it. 'You're the girl that lives upstairs with the Hallorans,' I said, and it stumped her for a minute, then she denied it, and said she didn't live upstairs; but why the deuce else had she been going in there? I was so sure, I grabbed her arm. 'You *are* the girl upstairs,' I said."

"What did she answer?" Mrs. Ashmead asked anxiously.

Hal reddened. He grinned sheepishly.

"You'd never guess, dear Mother. She wanted to know why men always had to touch one."

"Lothario," Wandel laughed, "you were well hit."

Hal bobbed his head.

"I'll tell the world," he mocked.

Nicolas smiled.

"Was her voice pretty and musical, Hal?"

"Never thought of that, Nick. Accustomed to judging beauty by face and figure. Would say I believe her figure exceptional."

The cousins snickered. Janet waved her hand.

"Keep your harem measurements, dear brother, for the office or the club."

"Just the same, sister mine," Hal said, "I'd give something to see her face; and you'll agree I had her. If she came out on the sidewalk she'd offer a glimpse, and if she went on upstairs she'd prove I was right. Only my knightly manners, learned at my mother's knee, made me turn on my heel. Besides, it was getting most awfully late, and Mother also admires punctuality."

Mr. Ashmead cleared his throat.

"Evidently you've never seen this girl who lives with the Hallorans?"

Hal shook his head.

"Then I wouldn't enter any farther into the matter of identities," his father advised. "You strayed quite out of your province. Now that you're back, don't leap any more fences."

Hal, it occurred to Nicolas, was one to take without proper reconnaissance headstrong leaps.

"Probably a lover's quarrel," Mrs. Ashmead offered. "In the morning neither one will thank you for interfering."

"Our aim," Janet said sarcastically, "is to keep our people happy and contented."

Hal didn't join the general laughter, and Nicolas became convinced that his parents' rebuke had only stimulated the young man's curiosity about the unknown girl. A perceptible embarrassment lingered, and the affair wasn't admitted again to the dinner talk. Later, however, Wandel brought it up with a question that had all along been in Nicolas's mind. Mr. Ashmead had gone to the library for some work. Mrs. Ashmead had retired to her room to encourage her headache. The cousins had been trundled off in a limousine. Wandel, Nicolas, Hal, and Janet went to an apartment that had been known even before Nicolas's departure for Europe as the children's playroom. It was a one-story glass addition at the end of the house facing the garage. Mr. Ashmead had designed it as a conservatory, but Hal and Janet had dedicated it to pleasanter uses. About the walls of glass, to be sure, many plants grew in boxes, pots, and baskets; and a vine had been persuaded to stray pleasingly about the curved roof; but a piano and

a phonograph were prominent in one corner, and near the entrance stood a large serving table for random suppers, or for the convenience of Mr. Ashmead who sometimes ventured to breakfast there when his family was away.

A low, mauve-shaded lamp glowed in a corner, and Janet, when she entered, didn't trouble to reinforce it. The delicate light created among the foliage more shadows than radiance. While Hal and Janet sat down in wicker chairs Wandel strolled on to the end of the room, drew back the hangings, and threw open a case-ment. Nicolas followed and glanced out, grateful for the fresher air. Across a narrow grass plot he stared at the brick wall of the two-story garage. There were no windows on the lower floor, but above he noticed two: the one toward the street glowed with light that filtered through a cheap yellow shade; the other directly opposite, probably a bedroom window, was quite dark.

As he examined that prosaic wall with its one dingy symbol of a different life Nicolas felt a stubborn interest spring from his adventure of the harbour and Hal's story. What elements of happiness, of sorrow, of drama were veiled by that faded curtain? At least he could picture a girl struggling against a man avidly desirous of marriage; and he could fancy the stunned greeting of a tired woman for the failure of a husband she had left ten years before—some small tradesman, probably, who, in an effort to raise himself, had stumbled down to mendicancy. Did he scold that pretty-voiced girl now because she had sent away the man, John, whose wages probably seemed opulent to him? A different world, as distinct from his own as the world of the trenches or the field kitchens had been! A compelling world! Almost certainly a world of emotions, unequivocal and naked!

He felt himself guilty of a social falsehood, of a supreme egotism. Indifferently he had lifted himself to immeasurable heights above those two, and behold! Harold Ashmead, with an equal thoughtlessness, had accurately measured the distance. At least he would guard as an inviolable secret what he had unwittingly heard in the harbour.

"Extraordinarily oppressive night for October," Wandel was saying.

"Leave the window open," Janet advised. "What are you two staring at?"

Nicolas glanced at Wandel. He, too, was unquestionably intrigued by the garage wall.

"I was wondering, Janet," Wandel answered, "about Hal's girl upstairs. You know who she is?"

Nicolas and he strolled back and sat down.

"I know," Janet answered, "what Halloran told Papa. They haven't been living with the Hallorans long. Name's Grantley. Mrs. Halloran made friends with the woman a long time ago, and I believe Halloran's crazy about the girl, because he has no children of his own. He asked Papa if he might have them to live over the garage. You know how Halloran stands. Those rooms are his to do what he pleases with, so Papa said he didn't mind as long as they behaved themselves. They have until to-night."

"Where," Nicolas asked softly, "did they come from?"

"From some cheap flat, I suppose. The mother works in a shop downtown, and the girl, I think Halloran said, goes to business college. I fancy that's why one doesn't see them."

"You mean, Sis," Hal said, "you've never once set eyes on this girl?"

"Oh, maybe once or twice at a distance."

"What did she look like?"

Janet stirred resentfully.

"A lot of red hair. A white face."

"Pretty?"

"Does it sound pretty? I don't know. Didn't notice. Probably quite ugly."

Hal stood up.

"I'd like to judge for myself. Much nicer to rescue a pretty girl than an ugly one. String of billiards, Driggs?"

"Domestic to-night!" Janet jeered.

"Night's in its infancy," he hinted, and lounged out, Wandel after him.

Nicolas lay back and lighted a cigarette. It stimulated him that Hal should assume he wouldn't care to play billiards when he could remain alone with Janet in a dim room.

This conservatory, he thought whimsically, was quite like an arbour. The world seemed full of such places, and they were not at all unpleasant. Two factors, however, made him ill at ease here: the startling growth of Janet; the feeling that, because of his father's financial muddle, he'd better avoid arbours with this provocative woman until he knew where he stood. He didn't care to make a gesture comparable with that of a man offering a tin cup for alms.

He glanced at Janet. She lounged in an easy chair, her feet crossed, her hands clasped in her lap, slightly attentive, as if she waited for him to speak. He tried to review the details of their youthful sentimentality. Six years ago, the night before his sailing, he had kissed her in this room, and she had not resisted. He racked his brain, trying to recall if any tremendous words had followed. At least nothing had been said sufficiently flaming to brand his memory; but then so much had intervened: two satisfying years in a Paris studio, the ambulance, his regiment, relief work—all the obliterating demands of war and its consequences; and her occasional letters had never recalled the incident. He asked softly, to feel his way:

"Nobody's told me you're engaged, Janet."

Before answering she took a cigarette from the stand. He stooped and lighted it for her. She puffed thoughtfully.

"How could they?" she asked at last. "Because I'm not."

Her voice was indifferent, as though the subject hadn't the slightest interest for her. Then she had forgotten that impulsive night, and his kiss. It angered him that she should do that. The girl he had known never would have. Had the attitude of superior women to such intimacies altered?

"What made you ask that?" she asked abruptly.

"Young persons of your age," he answered with a smile, "have been known to become engaged, even to be married."

"So I've heard," she yawned.

Her eyes laughing, she blew cigarette smoke at him. Her voice had a teasing quality.

"All day I've been wondering how far I would find you changed, Nick."

"Is it more or less than you expected?" he asked.

"Less and more," she smiled. "You look no older than when you went away, and you're just beyond thirty, aren't you?"

"Your memory's good, Janet."

"Men," she said, "alter less than women that way."

Quickly she stooped toward him.

"But you've changed just the same," she murmured; "a very great deal."

He studied her animated face. Did she accuse him?

"Just how?" he asked, trying not to take her seriously.

"You've lost," she said, "your—oh, what do they call it?—spontaneity. You never used to think twice before speaking. You're restless. Is that because of all the rotten things you've seen?"

With a professorial air he bent and tapped the back of her hand, then drew his finger away, thinking amusedly of the poor girl behind the brick wall who had wondered why men always wanted to touch one. Janet, at least, offered no symptom of displeasure.

"Don't you judge me yet awhile, young woman. Let me become acclimated. You've caught it. I am restless and depressed, and I don't think it's altogether the things I saw over there. I think it's partly what I'm seeing over here. Fact is, Janet, I feel as if my own country were a strange country. I find my own people as puzzling as Gulliver must have found the Lilliputians."

She made a face.

"We accept the splendid flowers."

She turned serious.

"Don't worry over Driggs' nonsense about American materialism. You know he never means more than half he says."

"I think you're wrong, about Driggs, anyway, Janet."

He sighed.

"Don't be discouraged. You may see me turn into the hardest-headed American of the lot."

She put down her cigarette. She didn't quite meet his eyes.

"Then you won't take up your painting again?"

The vision of his father, who had posed that question last night, flashed through his mind.

"I don't know," he muttered. "I want to. I—I don't know, as things are, whether it would do."

Probably she read his trouble, for she swung brightly away from the problem.

"And now, Mr. Nicolas, since we're exchanging compliments, how much have I grown?"

He laughed softly, sitting forward, his hands across his knees, openly studying her.

"You're a different person."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment," she said.

Nor was he. He spoke carefully.

"When I left, you were a girl, Janet. You're a woman now—forgive me—a little breath-taking. Must I learn to know you all over again?"

She glanced down. Her voice was rapid, verging on sharpness.

"You're wrong. I'm quite the same. But have it your own way. Already you know me well enough to find another cigarette. There are some in that crawly pewter box on the piano."

As he fetched the box he tried to nerve himself to a defense; for she had altered far more than he had expected. The prettiness of the girl Janet had been submerged in a brilliant and pronounced womanhood. There was nothing in his memory to account for her staccato expression which propelled cynical remarks, suggesting a profundity of intimate knowledge inconceivable in the girl he had known. That youngster wouldn't have taken such an attitude toward Hal's story. He didn't believe the triumph of suffrage offered a satisfying explanation. Janet, he guessed, hadn't changed radically more than other girls of her kind. Women, like men, had apparently caught a habit of referring every thought to individual prejudice rather than to a general opinion. All the frenzied and naked enthusiasms unleashed by the war along a single, blazing route, it seemed to him, had, now that the fire had died and the route been closed, scattered with an equal unrestraint along the numerous byways of personal impulse.

"Give me a share in your thoughts, Nick."

He couldn't tell her he was trying to sound the true depth of her alteration; nor could he confess that he found, almost reluc-

tantly, this emancipated, knowing woman more enticing than the ingenuous girl had been.

"Maybe," he temporized, "I'm recalling all the fun we've had in this room. What happy, ignorant children we were!"

As he struck a match and held it to her cigarette she looked quickly down. Her eyes half closed. Gracefully she altered her position. He fought the temptation to stray beyond the boundaries he had set himself. Afraid of her proximity, he wouldn't sit again. He strolled on to the window, and gazed thoughtfully across the grass plot at the garage wall. The vanishing of the single yellow light aroused him, and brought back once more to his mind the girl of the harbour and Hal's adventure. Evidently they had gone to bed over there.

He glanced at the opening he had guessed was a bedroom window. A watery moon had struggled to an extent from hurrying clouds, and in its diffused light, since his eyes were scarcely disturbed by the mauve glow at the farther end of the conservatory, he saw that the sash had been raised wide. He started and glanced quickly away. Certainly there had been a figure in the dark frame, the figure of a woman who wished to remain unseen; for a ruddy glint of hair in the pallid neutral ground between the moonlight and the darkness within, and a panicky motion of withdrawal had arrested his attention. He experienced a sensation of physical nearness to the slender and wraith-like figure of the harbour.

Why did she kneel at that open window? What was she staring at? The answer crept unavoidably into his imagination. To look from her poor home at this, to her, exciting and luxurious room; to compare her own routine with the apparently fortunate lives of its occupants. Of course, such a girl would do just that; and he wanted to call over to her to go away, that she was merely forcing on herself an acuter discontent. He smiled, wondering when he would outgrow the habit learned in Europe of desiring to help strange people merely because they suffered or were poor. Just the same that was an ugly situation, to live day and night, outcast, within reach of fantastic luxuries. All at once he visualized the narrow grass plot as a measureless sea, void of sails.

Trying to approximate the thoughts of that girl, he constructed

an ambition so exigent, yet so hopeless, that a sense of danger fought his interest. After all, it was such contrasts that bred revolution.

Janet had crossed the room noiselessly, drawn, probably, by his intent attitude; but she had misjudged his thoughts, for she looked up at him with a questioning, reminiscent smile, and her voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

"Nick! It was just here. Are you remembering—the night before you sailed?"

His nerves tightened. Then she hadn't forgotten their kiss, after all. He didn't stop to ask himself if it lingered in her mind as a youthful and amusing folly. He responded only to her warm and provoking nearness, and his arm rose instinctively to encircle her.

He caught himself just in time. If that girl who wondered why men wanted to touch one were still in her window——

"Dark as a dug-out here!"

Nicolas thrust his hand that trembled a little in his pocket; he smiled back, half dazed, at Janet, and turned. Perhaps it was fortunate Hal and Wandel had drifted in just then.

"Driggs trimmed me," Hal announced.

"Didn't take him long," Janet commented. "But I must run. I'm overdue elsewhere."

She held out her hand frankly enough to Nicolas.

"It has been nice. Don't forget you've six years' exile to make up for. You'll let us see lots of you?"

He met her friendly pressure too vehemently.

"I want to," he said.

But he fancied it would be better if he kept wholly away.

She hurried out. Wandel yawned. Hal glanced at his watch.

"Half-past ten," he announced. "Just time for the curtain of 'Fussy Feathers,' and then some jazz. What say, you two?"

Wandel shook his head.

"One with a political future must avoid a secular past."

Nicolas made his father and mother an excuse.

"You both mean you want to go home," Hal charged them.

"See here, Nick, you haven't come back a dead one?"

"Janet," Nicolas answered, "has suggested something of the sort."

Hal laughed.

"Then I'll take you in hand. Anything on to-morrow night?"

"No. Few people know I'm back."

"The cure begins to-morrow night. Dinner, the show; the rest is in the lap of the gods who can be counted on to furnish ladies and music. You'll be indiscreet for once, Driggs?"

Wandel yawned again.

"An occasional past is not unamusing."

"Then," Hal offered, "I'll pick you both up to-morrow evening. Let me drop you now on my way downtown."

He looked thoughtfully from one to the other.

"If you don't mind it would be simpler to stop in the garage——"

"Father's advice," Wandel interrupted, "is quickly forgotten."

Hal laughed.

"If old Halloran's still up, it would be fun to prod him a bit; but believe me or not, Driggs, I don't give a hang who the fellow is."

"But," Wandel said, "knowing you, my dear Harold, one guesses you'd like to learn more about the fair damsel. Will you ever mature sufficiently to be afraid of the ladies?"

"Perhaps when I lose my eyesight," Hal grunted.

He led them across broad, dimly lighted, over-decorated rooms, sent Grayson for their coats, and hurried them to the sidewalk.

"There," Wandel jibed, "was where the desperate villain tortured the pure and beautiful heroine while our hero dashed fearlessly from the garage."

Nicolas made out a narrow door close to the garage entrance. He pictured the girl, after her struggle, entering there still terrified; still vibrating, perhaps, with the unanswered question she had asked Hal. He, as much as Hal, wanted to see her again, this time in the light.

Hal had opened the wicket of the garage door. As they stooped, and filed through, Nicolas saw that a single light burned in a corner behind the cars. He heard old Halloran's voice, somewhat startled.

"Who' that?"

They walked back. Nicolas recognized old Halloran, sitting by a work bench with another man.

Halloran he had always known as an Ashmead family institution. He had served originally as coachman for Mr. Ashmead's father. The passing of his youth had paralleled the decline of the horse, so that he had been, after a fashion, pensioned with the rooms over the garage, and this sinecure as garage superintendent. Nicolas shook hands with him now, while he watched creeping through the old man's hearty welcome an embarrassment undoubtedly traceable to Hal's presence.

"Here, Mr. Harold," Halloran mumbled, "is the young lady's father to thank you."

Nicolas studied interestedly the other man who had arisen with Halloran and stood now fully exposed in the glare of the unshaded lamp. During his military days he had learned to size up men, yet he found this one evading him. He couldn't, for example, reconcile with the conversation he had overheard in the park the trusting brown eyes and the sensitive mouth. Aside from those features, however, Mr. Grantley was sufficiently the failure and the mendicant. Coat and trousers were threadbare, stained, and wrinkled as if they might have been for some time slept in. The collar was soiled. The necktie was arranged in a slovenly knot. Above, the iron-gray moustache was untrimmed, and the scanty hair had gone too long uncut, straggling across a high, curving forehead.

"Nothing—assure you," Hal was saying hurriedly.

The unkempt man shook his head and bent at the waist in a movement so unconsciously timed and gracious that Nicolas experienced a momentary illusion of standing in a drawing-room rather than a garage; of facing, instead of this seedy, middle-aged beggar, an important and self-assured personage. Wandel, too, watched curiously, but Hal was not impressed, staring at the dingy hand that offered itself.

"I hope," the scarecrow man said in a soft Southern voice, "that you will permit me to thank you, sir, from my heart. It was a very great service."

Hal laughed, accepted the hand and shook it limply, glancing at Halloran as if for aid.

"And these gentlemen?" the man asked.

Hal hesitated, cleared his throat, flushed. Wandel stepped forward and gravely shook hands.

"My name," he said in his high voice, "is Wandel, and this is Mr. Aldrich."

In his turn Nicolas took the ill-kept hand.

"I am highly honoured, gentlemen; but it is to Mr. Ashmead that I owe my profoundest emotion."

"Not at all," Hal said impatiently.

He swung accusingly on Halloran.

"Then it *was* the girl that lives upstairs, but I never heard she had a father."

"Mr. Grantley," Halloran explained awkwardly, "arrived this evening sort of—of unexpected like. He's been living in the South."

"Sure—hope you have no more trouble," Hal muttered, turning on his heel.

"Not to be dreamed of," Mr. Grantley said in his suave manner. "Had I been with my family such a situation couldn't have arisen. The man isn't fit to tie the laces of my daughter's shoes."

Halloran coughed, and evidently the other caught the hint, for in a rambling, constrained way he endeavoured to run from the subject of the culprit.

"In any case, now that I'm here, I hope to move my family to another residence——"

"What's the matter with their residence?" Halloran interrupted dryly.

"My apologies, Mr. Halloran," the scarecrow creature hurried on. "For years I have been looking forward to coming to New York to find work—profitable work."

"Then you've landed at a bad time," Halloran sneered; "jobs aren't as flush as they were."

"I'll find a place," the beggar said with perfect assurance.

"Get the door open," Hal called from the runabout. "And you two pile in here."

Wandel and Nicolas obeyed while Halloran sprang for the door, plainly relieved by their approaching departure. Hal, however, wasn't through with him. When he had backed out, he halted the car across the sidewalk and beckoned. Halloran came reluctantly, waited, his foot on the running-board like a man about to take punishment.

"Didn't know, Halloran," Hal said, "you were opening an old man's home."

"Nothing like that, Mr. Harold," Halloran urged earnestly. "I didn't expect him any more than his own wife and daughter. And he ain't going to get work—hasn't done a stick in the ten years since she left him. Says everybody misjudged him. They've thrown him out down South, and he's come for his wife and daughter to support, but I don't think Mrs. Grantley will stand for it, sir. Why, she's worked her fingers to the bone——"

"Let that drop," Hal interrupted the defensive flow. "Tell me about this girl upstairs. What's she up to, having street rows with young ruffians?"

Halloran was natural enough now. He raised his right hand in the gesture of a man taking an oath.

"Don't you dream no harm of her, Mr. Harold. It wasn't her fault he lost his head over her. Many's the man would. Why, she's a saint out of heaven."

"My word! All of that!" Hal scoffed.

"Is she, Halloran," Wandel asked softly, "conceivably to be described as pretty?"

Halloran choked with scorn.

"Pretty! Pretty! With that hair, and the face of a saint and——"

"That's quite satisfactory, Halloran," Wandel said. "You may drive on now, Harold."

The other, however, waited to ask:

"And the pugnacious lover? Funny how he went away so peacefully!"

"Guess you'd given him a plenty, Mr. Harold," Halloran answered hoarsely. "Wouldn't want you to hit me twice."

"Looked large enough to take care of himself," Hal mused.

"Suppose I ought to find out who he is and properly punish him."

Halloran's voice was startled.

"I wouldn't touch my fingers to that."

"And why not? Anyway, I'm off."

He swung the car down the street, laughing.

"Must have been John or Ralph. Had the old fellow fidgety, hadn't I?"

"Your father's right," Wandel said.

"I suppose so."

"Besides," Wandel reminded him, "you didn't go to the garage to find out about the man."

Hal made no denial, speaking under his breath.

"Funny to run into a girl and not know what she looks like. For all Halloran's enthusiasm, I daresay, if I saw her I'd wish I hadn't."

"Daresay," Wandel echoed.

"See here, Driggs," Hal demanded, "what are you driving at? I'm really not a Minotaur."

"Far simpler," Wandel yawned, "to picture you as a victim of the Lorelei."

"Queer fish, her pater!" Hal cried.

"A confirmed optimist, I should say," Wandel answered.

But Nicolas was inclined to dismiss his small tradesman theory, and he wondered from what heights the courtly, disreputable old beggar had actually fallen.

"Ought to take more interest," Hal was saying, "in the people who live on one's property."

Wandel bent and patted his back.

"Touching, this sudden paternalism! Suppose we drop you here, Nick."

Hal drew the car to the curb before a small, old-fashioned house between Madison and Park avenues. Nicolas climbed out, and the others drove away, calling back promises about to-morrow night.

Nicolas let himself in, and, after the simple customs of that house, turned out the hall light. His mother, he knew, would

have retired, but in the library upstairs he found his father in evening clothes, sitting alone before a smouldering fire. Nicolas smiled at the picture. War and famine might tear the world, but it was difficult to imagine them disturbing the guarded routine of this house. No matter what the vagaries of the weather, each evening now until the first of May the curtains would be drawn, the cigar stand arranged, and the fire lighted.

Mr. Aldrich laid down the book he had been reading. His son caught the anxiety in the dignified face with its white side whiskers, and the desire for an affirmative response to the simple question.

"Have a pleasant evening, Nicolas?"

"Very pleasant," Nicolas said, and paused uncertainly half-way across the room.

"Will you have a glass of something before you go to bed?" Mr. Aldrich asked. "I fancy Johnson's still about."

Nicolas was in no mood for dissecting skeletons to-night.

"I'm rather tired," he excused himself.

Mr. Aldrich sighed, picked up his book, and with a gentle rustling ran his thumb across the leaves.

"You're wise to take things lightly at first. Decided change for you. I want you to be careful. There were some matters I'd planned to speak about. To-morrow will do as well."

"If it would, sir."

"Oh, quite, quite. I've a chapter to finish. Good-night, Nicolas."

"Good-night, sir."

He went on up to his room, which, since his return, seemed like a haven to him; a corner unchanged and unchangeable. He glanced again over its worn furnishings, its books and its trophies—deflated and dusty footballs, old riding crops and boots, his first saddle, flung carelessly in a corner as it had rested for years. Trust his mother to see that the servants disturbed nothing here. The room was full of her, perhaps because there was so little of her physically in it; rather because it had witnessed her anxiety for him during his long and perilous absence.

He smiled contentedly. This home sheltered gods unknown

to the great and extravagant house of the Ashmeads. Between the two there was a difference not possible to be measured by money; and he drifted off into thoughts of the difference between the brilliant Janet Ashmead and Halloran's poor saint out of heaven. Of course, all that sort of thing was wrong, but it couldn't be helped, and he was glad, since it couldn't, that his home possessed the altars it did. Under the guardianship of those shrines he went contentedly to sleep.

His mother waited for him at breakfast the next morning, sitting at the head of the table which sparkled with old silver against dull mahogany. She kissed him, clinging to his hands.

"You're never going away again, Nick."

And for the hundredth time he reminded her he was only back. He gazed at her with an unreserved admiration. She was sixty but looked years less with her firm little figure, her rosy cheeks, and her hair which was only partially gray. He had always assumed she was the loveliest woman he had ever known, yet he was quite sure she had never been beautiful after Janet's pattern.

Now she wouldn't let Johnson do anything for him, buttering his toast, pouring his coffee, testing the heat of his egg before placing it in its cup; and while he ate she watched him as one who counts the minutes.

When he arose she followed him to the hall.

"Of course you have to go. When are you coming back? I can't bear to give you up to other people."

"Before you know it," he laughed, "you'll have too much of me, Mother."

"After nothing for six years? Good-bye. You'll be back for luncheon?"

He nodded and went out. He supposed he'd better accept Mr. Ashmead's suggestion and learn just how much the little fortune, invested in railway and public utility bonds, left him by his grandfather, had depreciated; but he wanted exercise. It wouldn't be unpleasant to walk all the way to Wall Street. He had little enough else to occupy him.

He went slowly, absorbing the increased and apparently mad

activity of his city. The streets were far more crowded than they had been before his departure. Through the shopping district he had to pick his way at a snail's pace, and wheeled traffic seemed to be perpetually blocked as if at each corner an accident had occurred. He passed huge structures he didn't recall: hotels, apartment houses, office and loft buildings. Only on lower Broadway did he find a type of gratification in the remembered dinginess, the vacillating skyline, the uneven pavements. In Wall Street he frowned at the scars left by the bomb explosion. They turned his mind to the devastation over the sea which he wanted to forget and couldn't. Devastation was unforgivable, particularly when it had no comprehensible aim; and he thought of the many who had given their lives here for an unknown cause; and he conceived of war as merely a vast explosion whose reason must remain a mystery to its victims; which, indeed, could have no valid impulse.

It was noon when, just beyond, he entered a high building. Ashmead and Warden at least were a conservative firm. For him their offices offered nothing new. The same line of glazed doors with gold lettering stretched along the hall; the identical elderly woman, her hair bristling with pencils as if they were a means of defense, sat on guard in the lobby; the accustomed group of clients, messengers, and applicants waited on stiff chairs. He spoke to the woman, went through, knocked at Harold Ashmead's door, and, in response to a brisk command, walked in. The young man gave the impression of being involved in tremendous affairs. His desk was strewn with papers. He held a weighty document in one hand, gesturing with it as he talked in sharp, incisive tones to a clerk. When he saw who his caller was he relaxed, threw down the document, dismissed the clerk, and lighted a cigarette.

"Father said you'd probably look in."

"I thought," Nicolas answered, "I'd better go over my shrunken lists."

"Marvin," Hal said, "got them out this morning, and I ran over them. Not so bad. Values will come back presently. Sit down, Nick."

He fumbled through a mass of papers, glanced up after a time, and pressed a button.

"Thought I told Marvin to send your envelope in. Must have forgotten. Won't take a jiffy."

To the boy who responded he said indifferently:

"Tell Mr. Marvin to send——"

He broke off. His manner altered completely. His face expressed a pronounced interest.

"No, no. Ask that new girl to step in. What's her name?"

"The one Mr. Marvin handed a job to this morning?" the boy asked.

Hal nodded.

"Grand," the boy mumbled. "Think her name's Miss Grand."

"All right. Tell Miss Grand to hustle in."

When the boy had gone he turned to Nicolas.

"Give her something to do."

"Give you a good look, you mean," Nicolas laughed.

"Just had a glimpse a while ago," Hal admitted. "Will say Marvin's a good picker. Ever notice, Nick, the average of our female typists?"

"Maybe a requirement of the junior partner," Nicolas said with a smile.

He heard a timid rap at the door. Hal called out cheerily:

"Come in!"

The door opened. In its frame stood a tall slender girl, with a mass of waving ruddy hair that made her face seem too pallid and fragile. Her manner was nearly somnambulistic, as of one who gropes a way through darkness. By gad, how striking! Then Nicolas started. His glance became fixed on one of the pliant hands. The sun burned on a single ruby in a silver and serpentine setting, and he knew as well as if she had cried it out that there had walked into this office, for Hal and him to stare at in the light, the girl of the arbour and the entry; Halloran's good and beautiful saint out of heaven and a garage.

II

THEY GROPE FOR SIGNS

HAL, Nicolas saw, didn't suspect the unusual girl's identity, and, consequently, found nothing exceptional in her having applied, the morning after her struggle with John, at his office for work. Why had she done it? As she walked toward Hal, accepted his instructions, and, with graceful, illusory movements hurried out, Nicolas reviewed her vigil in the window above the garage, her view from aridity of an unapproachable abundance. Had she chosen, indeed, she might have stood on her sill then and flung herself, crashing, into the conservatory. What a destruction that would have been! Yet he asked himself now if it would have hurt her more than this daring invasion of the office of Ashmead and Warden. Worst of all, she hadn't used her own name. What would Hal think when he found out, as he was bound to do, that she was Eleanor Grantley?

"Seems to have stunned you, Nick," Hal laughed. "She is stunning, what? Way out of the ordinary run with that complexion and hair. I'll have to congratulate Marvin."

"I really didn't take a good look," Nicolas replied with an affectation of indifference.

"Then," Hal advised, "feast your eyes when she comes back. Heard a brace of our cheerful cats talking about her in the hall a while ago. They've got their claws out already. 'I'll bet that suit of hair is costly.' 'Say, I'd give a week's wages to know where she purchases it.' That friendly kind of thing! As an expert I pronounce the lady's hair real. Stuff out of a bottle doesn't glow and wave."

"You say she applied for a job this morning?"

"Yes. Marvin's been advertising. Typists who combine beauty and skill are as short as skirts in the ballet."

"I see," Nicolas said, "that you have the average taste in furniture and females."

Once more came the discreet rap, and again Hal called:

"Come in."

With the slender silhouette of the girl in the arbour in his mind Nicolas studied her this time purposefully. He had thought of her fingers last night as fragile, of her pallid face just now as equally so, and he was content to cling to the word; yet her features were not meagre. They were made to seem so by her brown eyes, wistful and questioning; by her curved lips, half-parted, as if those questions struggled for expression; most of all, by the masses of her ruddy hair which wavered like dull, reluctant flames. For him, indeed, her fragility defined itself in Halloran's terms. She made him think of one of those lustrous and delicate religious figures painted by an Italian on the threshold of the Renaissance. Absurd that that ungracious man, John, should have dreamed of taking her, should have dared to touch the white and graceful hands!

She offered a bundle of papers to Hal.

"Mr. Marvin said this was all."

If it hadn't been for the ring and her hair Nicolas would have known her through her voice. Hal took the packet.

"Thank you, Miss—er—Grand."

Those white cheeks could hold plenty of colour, and her eyes could project fear as well as interrogation. Watching her, Nicolas wanted to point out the truth; desired to tell her she had made a bad mistake; fought an impulse to ask her why she had come. Then she was gone, leaving an impression of hurried grace, of a self-possession not invulnerable.

"You're right, Hal. Stunning!" Nicolas murmured. "Shall we get at these lists now?"

Yet as they studied the typewritten columns the girl lingered in Nicolas's mind, and he was conscious of a duty owed her, of a valuable expiation he might make for last night's unintentional

eavesdropping. Why had she made her mistake in coming here worse by taking a false name?

"If you wanted to, or had to market these now," Hal droned ahead, "you'd be out of luck; but if you can afford to hang on to the ones that are paying interest it mayn't be as bad as it looks. A few have foundered altogether. Still, Nick, paper's high. Might sell those for paper stock. And, seriously, some changes might be made to advantage. Good time to do it if you sell and buy to take a loss on your income tax. I'm not a broker, but I'll run over the whole thing with Father, and I'll try to get a minute with our stock exchange foxes in the morning. Drop in if you're downtown to-morrow, or any time, and find out what goes on."

He grinned.

"You know my revered grandparent is perpetually running into good things. He doesn't let much spoil on him."

Nicolas scarcely heard. In his mind increased the conviction that he ought to speak to that girl before leaving the office.

"Glad I'm not penniless," he said, rising.

"Not affluence, but enough to keep you out of the honoured criminal class. You off?"

Nicolas nodded.

"I'll say hello to some of the veterans on my way out."

He did: to Mr. Marvin, the office manager; and to Mr. Ashmead's brother-in-law, Alfred Warden; and, as he talked to them, he fought that sense of a plain duty owed. He paused in the hall after leaving Mr. Warden's office and vanquished his reluctance which assured him he was tainted by the very egotism of which he had accused his own people. Why, just because he was back, should he slough off the paramount habit, acquired in Europe, of helpfulness; and his advice to that girl might mean more to her than his scant, charitable calories had brought to the women of Poland; for it was sufficiently obvious she had answered Marvin's advertisement and come here with a definite purpose. Of the exact nature of that purpose he couldn't be sure, but if it was to come closer to the Ashmeads, or what they typified, she had only forced herself infinitely farther away.

He walked down the hall and glanced through the doorway of a large corner room crowded with typewriter desks; noisy with the clicking of keys; colourful with the smart, cheap clothing and the prismatic hair of many young women; odorous with an intermixture of uncongenial perfumeries.

The Grantley girl sat not far from the entrance, her hands in her lap, staring at her machine, palpably uncomfortable beneath the scrutiny of her new companions. It was as if in this sensitive state she became easily conscious of a new regard, for she turned her large, questioning eyes from her desk to Nicolas. He nodded curtly, and she arose and followed him to the hall where she faced him, tense and expectant. He shook his head, smiling. He found he couldn't speak to her as impersonally as he had intended.

"No. I have no connection with the office. I have nothing for you to do."

She relaxed, but the question in her eyes became more insistent.

"I am," he explained, "about to take a liberty."

She drew back and leant against the wall, suddenly frightened. He caught her whisper.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you mind," he asked, "my pointing out that you've made a mistake, Miss Grantley?"

His use of her name had the effect of a blow. She drew farther back, her shoulders drooping, her eyes closed. Abruptly she straightened, defiance overcoming her fear.

"How do you know my name?" she flashed at him.

For the first time he could appraise her will, her readiness to fight for whatever it was she coveted.

"Never mind," he answered. "Other people will find it out as easily as I. Fortunately you chose a name near enough your own to dismiss as an error. The next time any one calls you 'Miss Grand' explain the mistake. You'll think it odd my speaking to you, but, perhaps, I've had more experience than you, and you really should get yourself straight on the record here, Miss Grantley."

She touched her cheek with a finger as though to confirm its burning.

"Of course you're right," she whispered. "I ought to have known better. You—you mean you're not going to tell?"

He shook his head.

"Why should I? It was a mistake."

"It was a mistake," she murmured. "Thank you."

The existence of this further secret between them increased a sense of intimacy that had had its birth in his unconscious awkwardness of the harbour. He was about to turn away as a means of killing such an idea, determined to thrust her, now that he had done his part, finally from his mind; but her startled eyes held him.

"Please tell me how you knew my name."

He flushed and was unable to answer.

She half raised her hands.

"Please tell me. You have to tell me."

She broke off with a discouraged, helpless gesture. He heard in the corridor behind him sliding footsteps, a broken chuckle. As he turned to face the intruder he gave the girl a friendly smile.

"That isn't of the slightest importance."

Vehemently she shook her head.

"It is. It is. I have to know."

A high, cracked voice rattled in Nicolas's ears.

"Hal told me you were here."

A short, slender, shrunken figure approached; a man of eighty or more, clothed like the giddiest of young bachelors in white spats, a brown suit marked with purple, a gorgeous shirt, a green bow tie; and for all the parchment face, the infused eyes, the head nearly void of hair, the mummy-like creature didn't falter in his walk, giving the impression that he carried his gold-headed cane only as a final ornamentation.

Nicolas's welcome was genuine.

"I had hoped to see you last night, Mr. Ashmead."

A knotted, bony hand grasped Nicolas's.

"Don't care much for my children's houses," the grandfather said. "But I like to come to the office to keep things straight."

"I'm not a lawyer, Nick; but I've had so much experience evading the law that I can give my son and son-in-law a few useful pointers."

Nicolas was aware the old fellow liked flattery.

"They'd be the first to admit it. I believe you're looking younger than when I went away."

"Feeling younger," Beau Ashmead chuckled. "It's all in refusing to age. Now there's old Planter, ten years the advantage of me, but he's on the shelf, and ready to roll off; yet I dug as hard as he did. I gave the radicals as much as he gave 'em to growl about."

A movement made Nicolas turn. He was surprised to find the Grantley girl still by the wall, her anxious eyes fixed on him with their fascinated question. Her curiosity apparently had made her wait even after it had become clear she couldn't have her answer. She started to slip away now but Beau Ashmead called her back.

"Young woman!"

She paused, and he shuffled close to her, staring out of his narrow, red eyes.

"I haven't seen you here before."

"I only came this morning," she said uncertainly.

"And by noon," he rattled, "you're letting this young rascal flirt with you in the hall."

Her pale cheeks reddened.

"Nick! You leave our girls alone. What's your name?"

Nicolas smiled encouragingly at her.

"Grantley," she said, "Eleanor Grantley."

She didn't answer Nicolas's smile, but her lips widened for the old man—a sweet and instinctive tribute to his age, and Nicolas saw that he was pleased. One bony hand went up, and its hard fingers pinched her cheek.

"You're a pretty girl, Miss Grantley. What's this? No need getting red. It's only when young fellows like Nick here say such things—eh?"

He chuckled again, took Nicolas's arm, and led him down the corridor; and as he went Nicolas had a disturbing sensation that

her level glance followed him with its mute appeal, its helpless interrogation. Perhaps he should have answered her and confessed. Sharply it occurred to him that now he might never have another chance.

That evening when he had dressed Nicolas went down unwillingly and entered the library. His father, as he had expected, waited there to discuss the subjects he had avoided last night. His mother's absence made it impossible to elude them again.

Mr. Aldrich as usual sat in front of the fire. He pulled at the black ribbon from which his glasses depended.

"Ah, Nicolas! Have you a moment?"

"Certainly, sir. I'm waiting for Harold Ashmead. He's taking me on a jaunt to see the town."

Mr. Aldrich smiled.

"You'll find the town gayer. I'm told there are more frills and less serviceable raiment than usual. Would you pull the bell cord?"

Nicolas obeyed, and sat down close to his father, steeling himself.

"You had a talk with Ashmead and Warden to-day?" Mr. Aldrich asked.

Nicolas nodded.

"It must have surprised you," his father frowned, "to learn how the values have been squeezed out of securities."

"I'd been prepared by the newspapers," Nicolas answered. "If the market doesn't grow worse I can look forward to something like five thousand a year."

Mr. Aldrich clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"Not a great deal, Nicolas, for a young man of your position."

"I haven't had much chance to think of money the past few years," Nicolas said.

"You'll have to think of it now," his father warned him, "and I'm sorrier than I can ever tell you, my son, to have made it an acute problem for you. As I've told you, your mother and I have barely enough left to keep up some sort of appearances here. I mean, I can't help you as I had planned, and your

mother tells me your heart's set on going back to your painting."

"I had studied a long time," Nicolas said dully. "It's too bad to waste all that, and it's really all I'm interested in."

"Yet you must realize," Mr. Aldrich said, "it wouldn't bring you much—at least for a long time."

"That's true, sir. I've never thought of it in terms of profit."

"That's exactly what you must do now. Wall Street is going to grow sicker before it gets well. My misfortune may make it wise, even necessary, for you to reorganize your ambitions."

"Just what do you mean, sir?"

"I mean, your mother and I have plenty of friends—you have yourself, for that matter—who would be glad to offer you an attractive future downtown."

Nicolas tried to hide his repugnance.

"Wall Street doesn't attract me."

Mr. Aldrich ceased fumbling with his ribbon. He looked at Nicolas out of affectionate eyes.

"Have you," he asked slowly, "thought of any other means of improving your prospects so you could reasonably go on with your painting?"

Under that bland regard Nicolas's discomfort increased. He was relieved that Johnson just then should enter, bearing on a tray two small glasses—another custom of the house that amused Nicolas. Mr. Aldrich liked his cocktail ten minutes before dinner so that he might enjoy with it a few puffs from a carefully selected cigarette. Nicolas emptied his glass and shook his head when his father indicated the cigar stand. He longed for some means to make Johnson remain, but before Mr. Aldrich had struck a match the quiet, impassive man had slipped from the room. Mr. Aldrich drank. He lay back and smoked a trifle nervously.

"What," he asked, "did you think of Janet Ashmead last night?"

Nicolas changed his mind. To gain time he took a cigarette and lighted it.

"Disappointed?" his father prodded him.

"To the contrary. She has developed wonderfully. She's undoubtedly a very handsome young woman."

His father nodded.

"I think so, but you hesitate. What's your reservation?"

Nicolas sought for words.

"I'd scarcely call it that. I really don't know how to express it. She—she seemed a trifle sophisticated."

He remembered that he hadn't bothered about reservations when she had stood close, looking up at him, last night.

Mr. Aldrich dismissed the criticism with a wave of his hand.

"That's only a fashion, like short skirts. Young women must follow passing conventionalisms. Don't fancy this is anything more."

"I hope you're right, sir."

Mr. Aldrich set down his empty glass.

"No question. Only it's too bad all modes aren't graceful."

For the first time his easy control left him.

"You and Janet?" he asked, fidgeting in his chair. "Didn't you and she approach an understanding before you left us?"

Nicolas looked up, surprised.

"Hardly. Anyway, it was six years ago. But how did you know?"

Mr. Aldrich relaxed.

"Oh! Ashmead has joked about it a number of times."

Nicolas bit his lip. He stared. Then that sentimental moment had meant something to Janet. Had she, indeed, considered it of sufficient importance to take to her father, or had he merely guessed and formed a habit of teasing her? It pleased his vanity, but the other's manner disturbed him.

"That," Mr. Aldrich went on, "is why I was curious as to how you and Janet had greeted each other. An affection that survives six years' separation is quite unusual. You're lucky, Nicolas."

"Just how, sir?"

"The Ashmeads would be glad to have you. Mr. Ashmead's joking makes that fairly clear."

With an air of pride he glanced about the old-fashioned room.

THEY GROPE FOR SIGNS

"You have in a large degree what the Ashmeads possess only slightly. They're three generations old here, and——"

He laughed quietly.

"The first generation survives. That gay old fellow! But he was fit to found a great family, and the Ashmead men have always married well. He did, and his son did, and Harold will make the most brilliant match of all. Their hearts are set on it."

He commenced worrying his ribbon again.

"By the way, did you know, now that the viscount is dead, your Aunt Mary and her daughter, the Honourable Mary Morley, are coming home?"

Nicolas gasped.

"They talked of it when I saw them in London last month. You never mean, Father, the Ashmeads want Mary for Harold?"

"You jump at conclusions," Mr. Aldrich smiled. "It would be odd, though, wouldn't it? Of course you're too young to remember how people said Beau Ashmead nearly broke his heart when your Aunt Mary Goodhue preferred a titled Englishman to an elderly American widower. Naturally the Ashmeads wouldn't object to such a wife for Harold."

After his observation of the levelling power of hunger it shocked Nicolas to witness, in the world's shining example of democracy, the powerful survival of such fashions of thought. He failed to keep the sneer from his voice.

"At least you mean to say, sir, that Mr. Ashmead considers me quite fit for Janet?"

"How could he think otherwise?" Mr. Aldrich asked out of his simple patriarchal ritual. "Have you ever tried to approximate the Ashmead fortune, Nicolas?"

"No. Why should I?"

Mr. Ashmead laughed.

"One would think you had lived in France long enough—— Never mind. You don't imagine that Ashmead and Warden, profitable as it is, keeps those families going the way they live? It's old Beau Ashmead's money besides. When he dies he'll

leave one of the biggest estates in America, divided between his son and Mrs. Warden."

Nicolas stood up, and commenced to pace the room.

"What is it, Nicolas?"

"You've made me abominably uncomfortable, sir. I wish you hadn't said just that."

"Then I'm sorry I did," Mr. Aldrich answered. "I wished merely to let you know my satisfaction at such an outlook."

But Nicolas retained an idea that he had been advised, even commanded. It was what he had been afraid of, had wanted to avoid. Resentment against his father was a fresh sensation. Before the war it would have been beyond his power; but before the war, for that matter, he mightn't have found anything humiliating in this situation. He paused and stood with his back to the fire, trying not to speak too bluntly.

"This question of money puts me in a rotten position."

His father glanced up.

"Just why? It's merely an interesting accompaniment of romance."

Nicolas shook his head.

"It's destroyed the romance, since you've made it quite plain you'd like me to marry Janet Ashmead because she has a lot of money."

With an activity absurdly unrestrained for him Mr. Aldrich sprang up.

"You mean to impute——"

Nicolas experienced a sudden pity. His father was broken by financial misfortune. His mind was filled as it had never been before with money as a valuable and necessary commodity.

"I'm sorry, Father. I forgot myself."

Mr. Aldrich stuttered.

"Yo-you forgot yourself."

His temper was conquered by a troubled distress.

"You—you have quite misunderstood me. I should feel myself guilty of great awkwardness if anything I have said should interfere between you and Janet. You must promise me that it won't."

To smoothe the difficult moment Nicolas muttered:

"I'll try to see that it doesn't."

His father seemed satisfied, but Nicolas felt as if a heavy wall had been constructed between him and Janet, and, not unnaturally, because of this very conception, he wanted more than anything else in the world to cast the obstruction down.

Johnson slipped in.

"Young Mr. Ashmead is waiting, Mr. Nicolas."

Nicolas heard his mother's voice in the hall.

"Is that you, Harold? Won't you come up?"

She entered, flushed and youthful. She took Nicolas's hand.

"Of course everyone wants my boy, but it seems to me the Ashmeads are always taking him away."

Hal hurried in and with a slightly exaggerated respect spoke to Mr. and Mrs. Aldrich.

"Sorry to be a little late, Nick. Kept at the office."

"Training new stenographers?" Nicolas smiled.

"Funny, Mrs. Aldrich," Hal complained, "no one can picture me the slave to duty that I really am. Shall we run, Nick?"

Nicolas kissed his mother. Without words he tried to tell his father he was sorry and not to worry, but he left the room worrying himself; convinced, since it had been so baldly pointed out to him how he stood, that he must abandon any sentimental thought of Janet Ashmead.

A limousine stood at the curb. Hal spoke to the driver.

"We'll pick up Mr. Wandel, John."

Before entering, Nicolas glanced curiously at the young man in a chauffeur's uniform. He was big as he remembered the man of the harbour, and his profile was strong, coarsely good-looking, and surly. Nicolas shrugged his shoulders. What ill-assorted personalities! It seemed grotesque that those huge, stained hands on the wheel should last night have fought for the Grantley girl's fragile fingers. Yet why not? Was she letting herself in for much better? What earthly good could she expect to get out of the office of Ashmead and Warden? With a lot of luck she might marry a clerk——

"Come on, Nick. We're late."

He climbed in, and they started. Hal glanced at him knowingly.

"Not a doubt in my mind."

"About what?" Nicolas asked.

"About who was after that girl last night."

He indicated the broad back of the chauffeur.

"He wears a piece of court plaster—not a beauty spot, by any means. And the girl's gone from the garage."

"What?" Nicolas cried.

"Yes. Don't you see? That's what she must have meant when she told me she didn't live upstairs. Probably made up her mind then and there to duck the whole lot. Must confess the thing interests me. Sort of like meeting a veiled woman. Veils you can't see through are always exciting, don't you think?"

Then Hal hadn't learned who the new girl at the office really was; probably hadn't seen her again.

"When did she leave?" Nicolas asked.

"First thing this morning. All my news is from Halloran. He says she piled out with a suitcase right after her mother started for the store she works in, and her father left to hunt for his job. Saw the queer old fish just now in the garage, and he looked as if he'd been crying. The missus called him from upstairs. 'Edgar! Edgar! Come to supper!' Honestly, Nick, that voice would cut glass. But I guess they're all enough upset. Halloran really loves the girl as if she were his own daughter. He's going out scouting for her to-night. Seems she left most of her clothes, so they're hoping she'll send for them and give an address. Halloran says she was afraid of——"

Again he indicated the broad back of the chauffeur.

Nicolas, however, had an idea it was more than fear of John that had sent her away from the garage. Perhaps it had been a fear of herself or of her destiny which her father's return and John's rough amorousness must have painted for her with inescapable values. But he wished she had kept away from Ashmead and Warden. For what destiny awaited her there? He

"wondered what Hal's reaction would be when he learned the identity of his "stunning" stenographer.

"Probably went to the Y. W. C. A.," he offered. "She'll almost certainly communicate with them to-night. How does that fellow take it?"

"Got sense enough to keep his mouth shut," Hal answered, "but he's glum as a bear. I asked him what was the matter with his face, and he said something had stung it. Give you my word, I had all I could do to keep from laughing."

Nicolas's mind swung back to his own situation. During dinner in a dazzling, choking restaurant he had to listen to Hal excitedly relate for Wandel's benefit his news of the Grantley girl.

"Your interest is oddly persistent," Wandel commented.

The repetition scarcely disturbed Nicolas. He was telling himself that for the first time since landing he was without doubt about Janet, that he avidly wanted her. It angered him that such knowledge should come at the very moment he was made to understand he couldn't, according to his own standards, decently have her.

Hal had had a consultation with the head waiter. Excellent courses appeared, preceded and accompanied by a heady mixture in tall glasses that towered from beds of ice. The custom was general, and undulating waves of chatter frequently surged too high and broke in a spray of laughter, stinging and unpleasant.

Dance music slid huskily from a perspiring orchestra. Couples came and went among the tables. The constricted floor in the centre of the room was overcrowded, and offered a succession of collisions between men and women who progressed slowly, sometimes attempting through their motions an oriental suggestiveness. There was too much white of backs and shoulders, too much paint and powder, too much reasonless agitation.

Nicolas tried to enjoy it. The town was, as his father had said, gayer; and all these giddy ones struck him as incapable of penetrating with their myopic eyes beyond the silken, mirrored walls. He told himself it was merely a phase of his country,

familiar to a limited class. To draw conclusions beyond that class would be unjust. Then he bent forward, his eyes wide. On the floor, dancing with a man he knew, he saw Ethel Warden.

"Look there, Hal!"

"Oh, Ethel," Hal said. "There are the rest of them at that corner table."

Nicolas turned and saw Ethel's sister with another man, and Mrs. Warden, who looked on palpably amused. Decidedly, he reflected, the mode of sophistication scarcely waned. He felt it wouldn't have been so bad if those flushed youngsters had come entirely unguarded. He didn't like making a recommended adventure of such parties. In the days before the war young girls hadn't slummed in just that way.

"Nick," Wandel drawled, "seems surprised to find innocence among us."

"I wouldn't have expected to run into Ethel and Sally here," Nicolas admitted.

"Why not?" Hal asked.

"Company," Nicolas answered, "seems a bit mixed, rather noisy, altogether extreme."

"Perhaps," Wandel drawled, "that's why dear ladies from the other side of town drop in."

"People," Hal said carelessly, "go about everywhere nowadays."

"Janet——" Nicolas began.

"She's no caged exception," Hal answered, much amused. "I know she was here last month. Wally Tucker gave an immense party. Special stunts. Best jazz racket in town. What's the matter? No harm in it."

"You must learn, stranger," Wandel said, "that there are left in your city few hidden corners. The modern young woman can't understand why only men should enjoy the lights. She insists on seeing what there is to see. Who would chide her?"

"People," Nicolas mused, "don't even think as they did before the war."

Wandel laughed.

"There you're quite wrong. They think exactly as they did, only now they usually act on their thoughts. One often questions if sophistication and prohibition aren't synonyms."

"At least," Nicolas agreed reluctantly, "each adds a touch of adventure."

He endeavoured to put himself in key with the curiously assorted company. The liquid in the towering glasses warmed him and arranged his mood for the colourful and furious musical show to which Hal led them. His host with an easy familiarity identified various plump, laughing, and screeching young women on the stage, who furnished an illusion of enjoying the performance rather more than their audience. Some of these, Hal promised, he would meet later. He smiled at their painted faces indulgently, then all at once his interest was caught by a woman who, as soon as she stepped on the stage, placed herself apart from them.

The new arrival was tall, stately, and possessed of a lithe and lazy grace. It occurred to Nicolas that he had never seen a face less animated. She seemed, indeed, a lay figure, marvellously made to display gowns draped for her, as the programme pointed out, by one of the town's principal modistes. She had a good many lines, and she sang a song in a bad, monotonous voice, which however won an exigent applause; but her chief business seemed to be to herd the chorus. She was like a shepherdess with a flock, or a type of duenna, and Nicolas at that first glimpse conceived for her an uneasy distaste.

"Who is she?" he asked Wandel.

"Calls herself Clarice. That's all I know, but I fancy her last name is Smith, or Murphy, or Mandelbaum."

He turned to Hal and Nicolas heard him say:

"Your friend, Clarice, runs away with an awful lot. I've never quite made out what the crowd sees in her."

"Beauty, Driggs. Ask Nick how she hits him. What do you think, Nick, of the tall lady Ham?"

"Looks," Nicolas smiled, "as if she had been frozen one sharp morning in about half her clothes."

"Not bad. Cold chicken!" Hal smiled back, "but she's a

successful little rounder-up. I 'phoned her this morning. We'll go back and see what kind of a shindy she's arranged."

"I see," Nicolas said. "She's an old friend."

"Older than she looks," Wandel grimaced.

Wandel, Nicolas guessed, didn't care a great deal for her either, yet he looked forward with curiosity to seeing her between the acts. Hal led them back then past a disapproving figure who was too busy masticating tobacco to talk much. He seemed, however, to know Hal, and passed them through without protest. They found Clarice in a comfortable dressing-room, stretched on a pink-satin lounge, her hands clasped behind her head. She scarcely disturbed herself to welcome them. Her expression as of a perpetual smile hadn't altered. Except for a little higher colour, an over-dryness of her hair, a trifle too much individuality about her eyelashes, she was quite as she had appeared in the carefully arranged lights of the stage. She nodded at Hal and Wandel, and, in response to his introduction, took Nicolas's hand in a cold, lifeless grip.

"Pleased to meet you. How did you drag Mr. Wandel back here, Hal?"

Her casual voice was coarse and uncultured, quite out of keeping with her regal attitudes.

"The best of us, my dear Clarice," Wandel drawled, "enjoy an occasional thrill."

"Then," she said, "you're in the wrong pew. The stage is as pee-ure as driven snow."

"Strange as it may seem," Wandel said. "I've never driven snow. Has it the effect of slaying vice?"

"Spell it for her," Hal grunted.

"You leave him alone," Clarice said lazily. "He's a cheerful little companion for the tired actress."

Wandel bowed.

"Thank you, Mrs. Siddons."

With a drawn-out, languid motion she lifted a slip of paper from a table at her side and passed it to Hal.

"I've 'phoned the ones I've checked," she said. "You can catch the rest in their dressing-rooms right after the show."

You'll only need to call up two or three theatres. I've engaged some notes—black ones, with a drum and traps. If you haven't cracked Mister Volstead one we'll go dry. Run along now before the whistle blows."

Nicolas couldn't imagine her taking any positive share in the party she had arranged. She was like a product of some unnatural forcing, robbed of its intended beauty to achieve a fantastic and meaningless magnificence. He was glad to escape from the perfumed air of her dressing-room.

In the wings the three men were caught by a number of girls who made their way toward the stage. An electrician, experimenting with a spotlight, sent casual blazing shafts into the tangled mass, illuminating bobbing heads and huddled bare limbs, leaving the impression of a confused flock waiting for its herder, and he pictured again the frozen Clarice as a shepherdess. The light etched out a mass of red hair, recalling the ruddy-haired Grantley girl. Perhaps she was better off at Ashmead and Warden's than tangled in such a flock; for that red wig was the only individual note he got from the entire mass. These units of a herd were less than human, seemed to lack the power of stirring emotion. It was impossible to imagine women from his own world caught helplessly among them; yet after the play he would see them transformed into individuals with the individual's capacity for receiving happiness and suffering, for giving pleasure and pain.

They forced a way through and returned to their seats, but Hal was impatient and made them leave before the final curtain, driving them to a restaurant whose manager led them upstairs and through a reception foyer to a ballroom, half-lighted, drearily empty, with stiff gilded chairs in ranks about the walls.

The easy alteration measured by the next half hour possessed an informality, a spontaneity that made Nicolas question the validity of his memories of Central Europe. Nothing evidently had been foreseen beyond the renting of the private rooms. Hal muttered for a moment to the manager who bowed and took himself away. While Hal telephoned, running through the list given him by Clarice, and leaving word of what was up at the

haunts of his own friends, the lights came on, and quiet men entered and placed at the end of the room a long table on trestles which they set with linen, china, and silver; and dishes of salads, cold meats, chafing dishes, heaps of eggs, and platters of uncooked bacon. Four weary-eyed Negroes slouched across the floor, carrying a drum, a banjo, and a mandolin; grouped themselves about the piano; and burst desperately into noisy chords. As if all this had been arranged according to a perfect time table the guests commenced to arrive by twos and threes, men of Nicolas's acquaintance, who greeted him as if he had been away for a country week-end; girls he had recently seen in the confusion of the stage; and many men and women he had never met before.

Clarice arrived among the last and stood for a moment in the centre of the room, quietly appraising everything, apparently to satisfy herself that her standards had been met. The orchestra, as if in obeisance, achieved greater triumphs of sound and speed. Couples swirled out upon the floor. No one seemed to bother about introductions.

"Dance with somebody," Hal called to Nicolas as he swung Clarice past.

Already corks popped and the chafing dishes gave forth attractive odours; but Nicolas felt his sense of unfamiliarity increase. He was reluctant to ask favours from these pretty, too forcefully gay, unknown young women. Clarice left Hal and came over to him. He led her in the crowd on the floor. She danced superbly, but her motions were automatic as if her thoughts were far away, or as if she had no thoughts at all. For him she was a figure foreign to the warmth and impulses of life.

"Who's the big fellow with Clarice?" "Good-looker!" "Some millionaire."

He smiled as such random curiosity brushed his ears. Some millionaire! He had felt richer carrying about a desolate countryside the milk cans and loaves of an insufficient charity. He saw rich food sampled, half eaten, thrown away; and he realized the man who would settle a bill at the end of the month wouldn't be the only one to pay.

"Say," Clarice confided, "you dance well for anybody that's been in the sticks so long."

Indifferently he returned her compliment, but he was relieved when a man sidled up and took her. He wanted to feel grateful to Hal, but the extravagant process of seeing the town didn't particularly interest him. He leant moodily against the wall.

"What's the matter, hero?"

Wandel came up with a stout, pleasant-faced youngster who, he recalled, had been caught in the confusion of the wings. The girl's eyes held a wistful invitation.

"Trip a bit with this young dynamo," Wandel advised.

Nicolas nodded and held out his hand.

"I asked Mr. Wandel to do that," she said as they whirled about.

"Why?" he asked indifferently.

"Because," she smiled, "he says you're a hero."

"He says many strange things," Nicolas laughed. "I thought heroes were out of fashion in America. If I were one I'd keep it dark."

"Quit it. Women always fall for reckless men."

She smiled at him as if she meant it. She danced, too, as if her chief aim were really to please him. He conceived for the vulgar little thing a tolerant liking. Tripping about with her wasn't at all like dancing with Clarice. Just now an unimportant member of a flock, the girl had become sufficiently individual. She seemed to draw an exalted pleasure from their progress to the coarse music. When the orchestra recessed she led him to a corner.

"You like this sort of thing?" he asked wonderingly.

"You bet. Wish there were more of these parties, or I wish I got asked oftener."

"You're really a child," he said. "How long since you started to rival Madame Bernhardt?"

"Me? Never. Chorus is plenty good enough for me."

He glanced at her. Then she really liked it, and obviously she enjoyed talking about it, launching, before he could defend himself, on an account of her escape from a small Pennsylvania town.

"Regular costume place," she said, "not only on Sundays; every day. And if you whispered in meeting the elders put your feet right to the fire. This is more my idea of heaven."

With a fresh sympathy he studied the emphatic little creature, discerning no real harm in her. How simple it was in America for such people to respond to the urge to climb: how easy, too, to lose one's sense of height; to glide, when one believed oneself soaring, rapidly down to an abrupt and fatal collision with the truth! That girl with the face of a mediæval saint was at the same trick. As this youngster had fled from the rigidity of an ultra-religious community, so the Grantley girl had, perhaps, blinded by the sun, left the dinginess of the rooms over the garage. He found himself desiring that she should not have to submit to that abrupt awakening which appeared to him inevitable.

Uneasily his eyes sought Hal, surrounded by girls who were drawn to him as by a magnet. It seemed to Nicolas that he had been brought here merely to witness Hal's easy habit of conquest with women who were not of his own sort. And he had done Eleanor Grantley, such a woman, a romantic favour. Would she, any better than these girls, be able to resist his easy charm? Had he already aroused in her brain fantastic, mad ambitions? In such frivolity as this Hal's parents would find little unusual or dangerous, since he as well as they looked forward to his marrying exceptionally well. Restlessly Nicolas rose. His companion sprang up and grasped his arm.

"What's the matter? Don't you like me?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Then what you running off for without even asking my name? You got to dance with me again by and by."

He smiled indulgently.

"What is your name?"

She giggled.

"Bam—short for Bambino. No, it isn't. Short for Bamber. Sadie Bamber. My stage name is Yvonne Montmorency, but Clarice says they're not using high-falutin' names much nowadays, and everybody calls me Bam."

"Au revoir, Yvonne. We'll dance again."

Hal, gesturing broadly, beckoned to him.

"Nick saw her. The most amazing hair, Clarice," Hal enthused as Nicolas came up.

Hal, it occurred to him, had only two interests just now—the unknown girl of the entry, and the known one of the office. When he found them identical his interests would mingle and expand.

"Be glad to look her over," Clarice condescended.

Nicolas experienced a flash of anger that any woman's charms should be weighed in such scales.

"If she's a bust as a stenographer," Hal promised carelessly, "she mightn't mind your shop. I'll send her around. You could put her in the way of a job. Wouldn't hurt the average of any chorus."

"Still on the subject of red hair?" Nicolas asked. "I thought you believed a good set of fingers scarcer than a brisk set of toes."

Hal was a trifle flushed. He emptied his glass.

"Don't you worry, Nick. Very little gets away from me. I'm only afraid she's too darned ornamental to be much use. Clarice has the ears of the managers, and she'd look well dancing about here. What? Try some of these eggs. Why aren't you drinking?"

The music rattled again. The floor became crowded. Hal held his hand out to a girl, but paused, his eyes staring at the door.

"What the devil's this?"

Nicolas swung around and whistled softly. In the entrance stood the threadbare, haggard man of the garage. Some dancers paused and laughed, pointing. Everyone stared; but Mr. Grantley seemed quite unconscious of the sensation he produced. His expression was anxious and alert. His little eyes turned here and there, seeking, until they rested on Hal and Nicolas; then he relaxed and started forward.

Hal caught Nicolas's arm.

"What you suppose the old fish wants? Come help me get him out."

He was plainly angry. He wouldn't let the scarecrow man open his mouth.

"Come in here," he jerked out, and led him to the empty reception foyer.

Mr. Grantley offered his hand, but Hal apparently failed to detect it. The slight neither heightened nor decreased the man's anxious expression.

"What do you mean blundering in here——"

The unkempt cheeks flushed.

"Your man brought me in the automobile. Halloran's still hunting around the girls' clubs, even the hospitals and police stations. This message came a little while ago. I don't know how it got so much delayed. I hesitated to bother your father. I think he had gone to bed. Then your man said he was coming down here to wait for you, and he would bring me, if I wanted to ask you. I didn't think you'd mind."

Nicolas commenced to understand.

"Which man?" he asked quickly.

"The one," Mr. Grantley answered, "Halloran calls Ralph."

The anxiety of his expression became a positive fear.

"The other one—John—is off to-night. He—he——"

He broke off helplessly, but Nicolas grasped completely now his anxiety. Hal, on the other hand, probably because at the moment his brain was less clear, studied Mr. Grantley with a slightly bewildered air.

"What's all this?" he demanded. "Why the devil have you come to me?"

"Because I thought you might put me in the way of getting my daughter's address."

Hal stared at him as if he had lost his mind.

"This message from her," Mr. Grantley explained simply, "said she was working in your office, but she gave no other address. I thought she might have to you, or you could tell me who would know it. You see, Mr. Ashmead, her mother and Halloran and I want to go to her right away. We're afraid of—of that man you saved her from last night. If he should find her! He's been drinking, making threats——"

The colour had increased in Hal's face. Nicolas watched his eyes sparkle; heard him cry out incredulously:

"You mean to say that girl with the stunning hair is your daughter, Mr. Grantley, the young woman I gave a hand to last night?"

The troubled man bowed gravely.

Hal's smile was complacent. His over-stimulated brain was patently crowded by the romantic significance of the identification.

"Now that's funny," he muttered. "By Jove! Isn't that a queer one, Nick?"

But Nicolas was only profoundly sorry the revelation had had to come through the girl's father.

III

DISTURBING ENCOUNTERS

FOR a moment longer Hal studied Mr. Grantley. When he spoke his manner toward the scarecrow man had changed completely, had become conciliatory, even sympathetic.

"Since you say it is your daughter—but the girl who came to our office for work gave her name as Grand. You remember, Nick?"

Nicolas shrugged his shoulders.

"A mistake. Someone must have misunderstood her. Grantley—Grand."

"Probably," Hal agreed. "No, Mr. Grantley. I haven't her address, naturally. Marvin's the only one I can think of who would know, and it would be a chance if he carried it in his head. Still, I'll give you his number, and you can 'phone him if you like. Don't hesitate to wake him up. Say I said it was all right. Tell me first why you're so worried."

Mr. Grantley hesitated, clinging evidently to Halloran's theory that for the Ashmeads the culprit must remain anonymous.

"This man," he said slowly, "says he won't give her up. He came upstairs to-night and wanted to know where she was. When we couldn't tell him, he started off, swearing he'd find out for himself. He was drunk, with some raw stuff, I suppose. Then her letter came—a messenger boy brought it. All he could tell us was she had written it in a telegraph office earlier in the evening and it had got misplaced and delayed. She wanted the things she had left at home sent to your office."

"That means," Hal said, "she hasn't settled definitely anywhere yet. Really, I don't think there's much cause for worry. The too-devoted lover hasn't a detective's chance of locating her

to-night, and that's just about none at all. Come down in the morning and give her the third degree yourself."

He wrote Mr. Marvin's home telephone number on a card and handed it to the other, but Mr. Grantley's anxious expression didn't decrease.

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Ashmead. I—I hope I can find her. No—no one else has asked you for this information?"

Hal shook his head.

"Who would? Oh, the ardent wooer! Well, no one has."

Clarice appeared in the doorway.

"Hate your own party, Hal? People are beginning to think you've beaten it."

"Coming, sweet chuck!" he called.

He turned back to Mr. Grantley, his eyes wide again.

"Run along, talk to Marvin, and stop fussing. Very funny coincidence!"

But Nicolas guessed there was no chance in Eleanor Grantley's presence in the office of Ashmead and Warden, and he wondered just how much her encounter in the dark with Hal last night had led her to apply there. While Hal returned to the ballroom Nicolas followed Mr. Grantley to the elevator.

"May I ask if anything happened last night to explain your daughter's leaving this morning?"

A little red came into the other's cheeks, but it was plain he was eager to tell all he knew, even at the price of some self-abasement.

"Her mother and she didn't expect me, and I guess my coming upset them both. Then she had this fright, and after she had gone to bed, as I supposed, I found her in her room crying in the dark."

Nicolas wanted to ask him if he had found his daughter crying in front of an open window. He nodded, satisfied, when Mr. Grantley hinted as much.

"I guess it had been pretty hard for her to live next door to that big house, seeing all the fun and never having any of it herself; and I admit I told her she ought to have."

He raised his eyes as if to heaven.

"Don't think that was silly, Mr. Aldrich. She's fit for anybody."

Nicolas was swept by a momentary contempt for a man who could mouth such fantastic affection after leaving his wife and daughter to a ten-year-long struggle for a living.

"What else did you say?" he asked dryly.

"Said I was glad she didn't want to marry that fellow. Her mother seemed to think she might do worse, but then her judgment's warped. It hasn't been easy for her in New York, but I do blame her for taking Eleanor to live over a garage."

Nicolas wanted to tell the other it was quite his own fault. Probably Mr. Grantley saw something of accusation in his eyes, for he looked down.

"Eleanor," he went on, "lost her temper. She said if she was to have any chance at all she would have to look out for herself, but I told her I would look after her, now that I had got North. I said I would give her every chance."

Nicolas couldn't smile, for the trustful eyes of the ragged man were full of hope.

"It never occurred to me she was going to get out that way on her own hook the first thing, but her mother says she's had a high-school education and has been at business college for a year, so I guess she knew she was bright enough to find work about anywhere she asked."

He looked down again.

"I wish she had gone somewheres else."

"Why?" Nicolas asked.

"It—it's a little humiliating," the other said with difficulty; and that, evidently, was all he thought of.

"I hope," Nicolas said, "you found a place yourself to-day."

The anxiety in the grizzled face increased, but in Mr. Grantley's eyes the hope did not diminish.

"Not to-day, but to-morrow, or the day after."

The door of the elevator opened, and he stepped in, while Nicolas strolled back to the crowd whose happy voice had increased in volume, whose activity had become more frenetic.

He fulfilled his promise to the Bamber girl, but her chatter no

longer interested him. His mind was full of that hopeful old failure, and the daughter who had challenged fate by going out to look for her chance; and his uneasiness increased.

His cousin, Richard Goodhue, came in, spoke to Hal, chatted for a moment with Clarice, then walked over and sat down beside him.

"Heard Hal was brightening the lives of countless singing and dancing ladies to-night," he said, "and largely for your approval, Nick; so I thought I'd run down for a minute."

But his cousin, Nicolas fancied, had come with a purpose less easily stated, for his manner had altered since he had seen him at the wharf.

"Must say," Goodhue rambled on, "Hal likes plenty of brightness in his life, and I suppose it gives these girls a good time, but doesn't it strike you as a trifle sophomoric?"

Nicolas laughed.

"Might say that of all New York."

"Yes, you might," Goodhue agreed, "until you got adjusted. That reminds me. Mother told me something to-night I'm afraid I hadn't quite appreciated."

Nicolas glanced away. Mrs. Goodhue was his father's sister. Mr. Goodhue was rich in city real estate holdings that had come down to him through generations. He would go gladly enough to the rescue of his wife's family. It irritated Nicolas that his father could urge him to marry Janet Ashmead while the idea of taking money from his sister's husband would be abhorrent.

"Too many generations," he mused whimsically.

"Thought," he said aloud, "bad news travelled faster."

"If there's any possible way I can help, Nick," Goodhue said earnestly. "You'll want to get back to your painting——"

Nicolas didn't pretend to misunderstand. His father was right to this extent: no matter how most of his friends felt about it, it would be simpler to barter for money with a bride than to take it this way.

"I'm grateful, Dicky, but if I started that sort of thing I'd be living on other people the rest of my days."

"Forget your silly Aldrich pride," Goodhue advised. "Think it over."

Again Nicolas wondered just what the Aldrich pride was.

Hal came up, flushed and a trifle unsteady.

"What's the matter with you two hung-ups?" he cried. "Eat. Drink. Dance. Make cute speeches. Cheer up the ladies."

"Let's get out," Goodhue said when Hal had wandered on.

"Where's Driggs?" Nicolas asked. "I ought to wait for him."

"Met him," Goodhue said, "leaving as I got in the elevator."

"The snake! I wonder if Hal would mind."

He found his host and thanked him for the jaunt about the town. The Bamber girl caught his arm as he was slipping out.

"My name's in the telephone book," she announced.

"Do you find that helps?" Goodhue asked gravely.

"Go on," she laughed. "Sometimes people get me."

"Mr. Aldrich!"

Nicolas turned.

Clarice was after him with an effect of slow pursuit.

"When you've nothing better to do drop in at my show. Always glad to see you back."

After the warm pressure of the Bamber girl's hand hers was cold and repellent, like a dead thing's.

Nicolas slept badly. The woman, Clarice, drifted through his mind, keeping pace with the arresting, groping figure of Eleanor Grantley. Half-dreaming, he decided it would never do for the two to meet. The conclusion brought him wide awake. Why should he be perpetually reminded of that girl? What business was it of his what happened to her? She had gone to Ashmead and Warden's, and she could get herself out in any way she pleased. He had once cared for women who starved for food. It certainly wasn't his job to look out for women who starved for the light. But he wished that tattered father hadn't stared at him so trustfully; nor did he care to have his conception of a mediæval saint too badly used by modern infidels.

He found it convenient the next morning to learn if Hal had

talked with his brokers. He managed to arrive a little after noon, and he wasn't at all disturbed when Hal said he had no information for him.

"Fact is," Hal grinned, "I overslept a little this morning, and I must have eaten something last night that didn't quite agree with me. You sleep all right?"

"Except for nightmares," Nicolas answered. "I had a vision of your new stenographer hounded by reckless admirers. Her father come down this morning?"

"I believe so," Hal answered, "although it was before I had recovered sufficiently to face the world; so I daresay the family is happy, and the reckless admirer had no more luck finding her than her fond parents. At least when I saw her awhile ago she showed no signs of combat."

Nicolas laughed.

"You'll end," he said, "by having to get rid of her or the husky John."

"Don't follow you," Hal objected. "We merely conjecture it's John. I will say when he drove me to the subway station this morning he was nursing a worse *cafard* than mine. In his sober senses he must realize he has to take his medicine. Besides, you seem to think good chauffeurs grow on taxicabs. Let me tell you, relic of Ford on the battlefields, they're about as scarce as hair like that girl's."

He gazed from the window, smiling.

"Why the devil do you suppose she picked out this shop?"

Hal's attitude was easily comprehensible. That was why Eleanor Grantley had made a serious mistake. Nicolas commenced to select his words with a minute care.

"Probably because she wanted work. Marvin, you said, had been advertising."

"So," Hal countered, his self-satisfied smile persisting, "had other people."

"Are you so blown with pride," Nicolas asked slowly, "that you dream your helping her out the other night had anything to do with it?"

Hal swung around.

"Not an unpleasant thought," he said frankly. "Or was it because she lived next door?"

"Nonsense," Nicolas said, knowing it was nothing of the sort. "The fact that she lived next to the Ashmead house wouldn't give this office any separate importance in her mind. You, of all people, ought to be able to appreciate the distance between the rooms over the Ashmead garage and the rooms in the Ashmead house."

He stood up, adding incisively:

"Not possibly to be bridged from either direction."

Hal laughed.

"As of academic interest I'll argue that. One side of your yawning chasm doesn't think so. Every time some weak-minded fool marries Terpsichore, Ophelia, or Mimi Pinçon the whole tribe gets excited. It's bad for them, but it's thoroughly Anglo-Saxon."

"You conceited ass!" Nick muttered.

Hal lighted a cigarette and smoked lazily.

"An academic discussion!" he reminded Nicolas. "I am merely an admirer of beautiful objects. A connoisseur doesn't have to grab everything he sees."

But Nicolas remembered that connoisseurs usually wanted to.

"Besides," Hal went on carelessly, "she'll probably be a bust, and Marvin will have her out of here in a week."

Nicolas reddened.

"Then you'll suggest Clarice to her?"

"It might be a kindness," Hal yawned. "I'll have to find another job myself unless I take the veil. I'm going to be very careful what I eat after this."

Nicolas glanced at his watch. It was nearly one o'clock. He said good-bye, went to the hall, and chatted with Mr. Marvin whom he met there. The tall, slender figure of Eleanor Grantley passed, going toward the entrance. She wore a cheap cloak and a becoming, inexpensive hat. Nicolas knew that she saw him, for colour came again into her white cheeks, and she glanced quickly down. He got away from Marvin and followed her, wondering if he had actually timed his movements for such an en-

counter. He caught her in the hall, waiting for an elevator, and raised his hat. She looked once at him beseechingly, then turned away.

"You haven't told——"

The elevator door slid open, and they entered and were separated by crowding passengers, but in the lower hall he waited for her, thinking of Clarice who had promised to look her over. He would feel more comfortable if this girl knew how he had learned her name. It was intolerable she should think he held over her head a threat. She came straight to him, as if she had known he would wait.

"You will tell me now," she asked, "how you found out my name?"

He nodded.

"Since you seem to think it of importance. You are going to luncheon. May I walk a way with you?"

Without answering she started for the door, and he followed her. Side by side they paced up Wall Street, picking a way through the noontime crowd, saying nothing. When they had turned down Broadway they found the sidewalk less difficult, and he spoke without much thought:

"You were off to luncheon. Why not with me?"

She glanced at him, her large eyes more questioning than ever. For a moment she seemed to swing between two choices. Then he was glad to see her shake her head. Perhaps, after all, she had a sense of altitudes.

"Please let's walk on," she said, "while you tell me how you found out my name and why you didn't tell your—your friends."

No doubt about it then. She had seen him in the Ashmead conservatory. As yesterday he found it more difficult than he had foreseen to speak casually, impersonally, to her.

"Why did you go out of your way? Who are you?" she urged him, and her voice and her manner had the effect of an uncompromising withdrawal.

He told her his name, the story of his return, and how he was, in fact, an old friend of the Ashmeads; but they had crossed Bowling Green and walked between the grass-plots and the straggly

trees of the Battery before he got to her real question. He pointed out an empty bench facing the aquarium.

"Shall we sit down for a moment?"

She nodded, sat down, and waited, looking straight ahead. He, too, stared at the brown scarred walls, finding it, as always, difficult to talk with her in an off-hand manner. At last he shrugged his shoulders and, without once glancing at her, told of the chance of the harbour and the story that Hal, a little later, had related of her struggle in the garage entry.

"It was," he ended, "the flashing of your ring in the light that made me realize I had been quite lost in the shadows. So, when I saw you at the office, through that and your hair, I recognized you."

"And why," she asked calmly, "didn't you tell?"

Youths and laughing girls from the near-by offices strolled by. Ragged men, the vanguard of the city's unemployed, stood about listlessly, gazing with weary eyes across the choppy water. Why hadn't he told Hal? The only reason he could give himself was his apprehension of an ill-advised ambition.

"Because," he tried to satisfy her, "I had been awkward. I had never been intended to know."

"How much," she asked, "did you hear in the park?"

"Oh, little or nothing," he said hurriedly.

She shook her head.

"I guess you heard everything. Tell me."

He turned then and faced her. She was paler than ever. Her eyes were wider, more inquisitive.

"Did I do right?"

At first he failed to grasp the significance of her blunt question.

"Did you do right?"

"Yes," she said evenly. "You heard him—saw something of him."

He relaxed.

"I'm unable to advise you about that."

"You thought," she went on with her even, studied manner, "that I was asking if you approved of my applying for work where I did."

"Perhaps."

"You might answer," she said. "You went out of your way yesterday and to-day, because you wanted to make up for listening. You've said as much. You might answer, then. You think I went to Ashmead and Warden's because he—he helped me the other night."

He became aware of the extreme rigidity of her pose. Her eyes were fixed on the flat and grimy Jersey shore, but he knew she saw nothing. She did have a way of sweeping one beyond one's limits! He sought to evade her quiet will.

"Maybe," he said, "I wondered why you didn't go to the theatrical agencies instead."

She flushed and became less unyielding.

"Thank you. It never occurred to me. I couldn't go on the stage."

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't at all what I want."

He didn't doubt her, and he was subconsciously pleased that she wouldn't give the calculating Clarice a chance to look her over; but what the deuce did she want? And what did he mean sitting in Battery Park hovering on the edge of confidences with a pretty office girl? Proof enough that Europe had moulded him more than he had realized! At least he had expiated whatever unintentional wrong he had done her. She would have to go her own way now. He stood up and looked down. Pretty office girl! She was more than that. She suggested a mediæval mysticism that a man might like to paint——

"What do you want?" he asked half angrily.

"What many women want," she said, and arose and stood beside him.

For a moment she seemed to forget him. She had an air of flinging over the waters, in the face of the wind, a defiance.

"And I mean to have it."

He stared at her, and she smiled.

"Some new clothes, you think? Maybe."

He was on the point of telling her he didn't think anything of the sort, but he drew defensively back. As they walked toward

the office he tried to place himself at his proper distance, tried to destroy this growing sense of secrets existent between them.

"How are you getting on?" he asked in his remotest manner. "You think you will please Mr. Marvin?"

If she detected the change she gave no sign, answering unaffectedly:

"I'm sure of it. It's quite easy work. But I must hurry. I can't afford to take chances with Mr. Marvin yet. I am sorry you think I shouldn't have gone to work there."

Suddenly he remembered. How had he chanced to forget? For that matter he hadn't eaten himself.

"And your luncheon?"

"Nothing much to miss," she said lightly.

"I am very sorry. I forgot."

She studied him for a moment.

"Why," she asked in that level tone with which he had already become familiar, "did you forget?"

"Because," he answered, "I'm stupidly careless. Isn't there still time?"

She shook her head. She paused.

"You needn't come any farther."

He gasped. Was she dismissing him? No. It must be that she didn't want the other girls from the office, who might be streaking along Wall Street, to see him with her.

"Thanks," she said. "You've been very good." A little bitterness crept into her voice—"Very charitable."

He had a quick impulse to touch her fragile fingers. He held out his hand. She hesitated a moment, then met it, and he felt that those fingers were not quite steady. Was that because she wondered again why men always wanted to touch one? At least the contact was warm and frank. He released her hand and walked away, aware of a more probable reason for her unsteadiness. She had, he told himself, been under a strain. Every word she had said had been calculated—designed to draw him from his impersonal attitude, or merely to impress him, as one worth impressing, with her worth.

He shrugged his shoulders. He tried to put her out of his

mind, but one aspect wasn't easily dismissed—her defiance; her, "I mean to have it."

All at once his mind was made up. Wall Street and his father's ambitions could go hang. Meaningless frivolities might swing with them. He would find a cheap place and paint. No more use torturing himself with the problem. He wanted to paint, so he would paint no matter what happened; and he didn't at all realize that Eleanor Grantley was responsible for his sudden, unbreakable determination; but she didn't slip easily from his mind. That, he thought, was because she had the compelling interest of some queer creature miraculously descended from another planet, a fascinating growth with which he couldn't possibly have anything in common; so at last he thrust the memory of her aside.

He dined at home, and, while smoking with his father over coffee, announced the decision he had reached that afternoon. Mr. Aldrich couldn't hide his perturbation, his disapproval.

"You mean," he said, in a voice exceptionally harsh for him, "you are going to drift away from your own people; you are going to bury yourself in some dusty hole."

"To an extent," Nicolas answered quietly. "Naturally I don't care to accept too much hospitality that I can't return."

Mr. Aldrich set down his cup and stared. When he spoke his voice was sharpened by a sneer.

"Stranger among your own people—didn't you say something of the sort? Apparently it's true. Where have you acquired such ideas?"

"I've quite made up my mind, sir," Nicolas answered patiently. "Let's put it then on the score of time. My work's more important than dining and dancing about, but I really don't intend to become a recluse."

The line in the centre of his father's forehead deepened.

"And what about Janet, Nicolas?"

Nicolas, answering to his old sense of revolt, gazed at a dull portrait of a remote ancestor. How would that old fellow have felt about it? Probably exactly as his father did, and

he wondered if, under happier circumstances, he would have gone this evening to the Ashmead house, have spoken to Mr. Ashmead, have led Janet to the conservatory to complete in its mauve shadows the interrupted gesture of the other night. Would Janet, perhaps, wait until things were straightened out?

"Dicky," he challenged his father, "was very generous last night with offers to help. Of course I refused them."

"Of course," his father said without the slightest concession to his inconsistency. "Richard should have known better. But Janet? What about her? Hasn't it occurred to you you might owe Janet something?"

"Just what, sir?"

Mr. Aldrich attempted a smile.

"You're not altogether bad-looking, my son. Girls turn to good-looking men. It isn't beyond the bounds of possibility Janet might be in love with you."

The implication carried a thrill, but Nicolas dismissed it with a flush.

"What nonsense!"

"At least," his father bargained despairingly, "promise me you'll see something of your friends—particularly the Ashmeads."

"I promise," Nicolas smiled.

His father stood up.

"I suppose one ought to hope that Janet doesn't care much for you. I'd hate to have it said a son of mine had been unkind to a woman because of some barbaric notions."

"Barbaric?" Nicolas repeated softly. "Yes, I suppose they are."

It seemed impossible to dodge the subject. As he was going to bed his mother slipped into his room, sat on the edge of the bed, put her arms around him, and with her first words let him see Mr. Aldrich had been fretting to her.

"You're not to worry, Nicky boy."

"About what, Mother?"

"About getting married."

"No one," he complained, "seems to think of anything else in this house."

She patted his shoulder, speaking soothingly.

"I don't want you to misunderstand your father, because your happiness is his chief thought. When his investments turned out badly—and who would have thought you could lose money in shipping when people had made so much?—he became afraid of your return. This idea about Janet changed everything for him, made him cheerful again. Don't you see, dear, if you were so comfortably married the sting of his failure would be half gone?"

She held him closer.

"I just want you to understand that. I don't want you marrying any one, going away again."

He saw her glance at the faded souvenirs of his boyhood. He felt a tear on his cheek.

"It's dreadful to think you're old enough to talk of such things."

He kissed the tear away.

"At least we needn't talk about them for a long time yet."

"And then," she said, "it won't be what your father wants, or I want, or any one except just yourself."

"You'd bless any one I chose?" he asked wonderingly.

"Of course, Nick. Why not?"

"Men we know, Mother, have made pretty dreadful messes. Remember poor Tom Raney? Didn't he marry a professional dancer who drank too much? Seems to have dropped out of sight. And you haven't forgotten Ned Scatterfield—ran off with his secretary?"

She placed her hands on his shoulders, held him away, studied him fondly, without concern.

"They were not my boy. I can't fancy you choosing anything but the very best, any unsuitable girl."

He laughed derisively.

"I can't either, Mother. What nonsense we're talking!"

During the succeeding days he learned that the fulfilment of a resolution isn't as simple as its conception. The cheap place he had decided on didn't seem to exist. The rent for such vacant studios as he found surpassed his entire income. Driggs Wandel, whom he met at a club one afternoon, in his casual way, stretched out his hand and drew him back from discouragement.

"Great geniuses," he drawled, "invariably have difficulty finding the proper garrets—particularly since rents went beyond the roof. Got your very own garret yet, genius?"

Nicolas shook his head.

"And I've searched low as well as high. Seems to require a swollen purse to be an artist in New York."

"Not at all," Wandel objected, "if the artist only lets his friends know what he's about. There's Effie Morice—does those wiggly decorations everybody's crazy about: she's off for a year in Bella Italia, and she won't put her studio in the hands of the agents; prefers simply to have the rent paid and somebody in whom she knows and can trust. I told her I'd speak to you; and she said she'd be pleased if you weren't already accounted for."

"How much?" Nicolas asked uncomfortably.

"Not a great deal. Something like a couple thousand, for she was wise enough to sign a long lease before the Armistice, when the landlords thought the war would make fewer rather than more tenants. It's a converted stable. I don't have to tell you all the really swank daubers affect them."

Nicolas was grateful and relieved. He knew Effie Morice, who in spite of an inherited fortune and a wide popularity had used her studio for work instead of play, and had acquired a reputation near the top. She told him she wasn't getting out for another ten days; so, after making quaint oaths that he would guard the canvases she planned to leave, he accepted the Goodhues' suggestion that he spend his recess at their Long Island house.

Play there was more compelling than he had thought to find it. He hunted a few times and scrubbed at polo to discover he

hadn't gone back as far as he had imagined. He took a keen joy in the crack of mallet against ball, in the frequent chagrin of outwitted opponents; yet his friends' congratulations were like an acid applied to a wound.

"You might break into the internationals yet," they were always telling him, "if you'd spend the winter in California or Florida, playing your head off."

If his father hadn't been caught in the shipping slump, indeed, he might have tried; for as a youngster, observing the most perfect polo skill in the world, he had dreamed of some day playing on an international team. Now his only likely recreation was a week or two as somebody's guest in the South, and even so he would have to calculate pretty closely his tips and railroad fares.

"I'm going to stick to my work this winter," he would explain.

"What are you up to?" someone was sure to ask.

"Painting."

Usually a brisk deliver in Wall Street would lift his eyebrows and smile knowingly.

"I suppose it is work. I mean, got to stick to the job, and all that, to be sure you get the prettiest models. Huh?"

Janet, the Warden girls, Hal, and Wandel came out unannounced for the week-end, driven by the sullen but capable John. Nicolas felt that he wouldn't care, if he were Hal, to have John drive him about much.

"Looks," he said, "as if he'd enjoy dumping you over a precipice."

"Aren't any on this part of Long Island," Hal answered carelessly, and sent the man away; but Nicolas saw John's eyes follow his employer's son vindictively until a curve of the drive had hidden him.

Nicolas turned anxiously to Janet, who, in a sport suit and unnecessary furs, seemed to have brought more colour to the terrace than the fallen leaves had taken away. Her hand-grasp was warm, her smile content.

"Hoped we'd find you here, but I was afraid you might be down Washington Square way in a velvet jacket."

"Monday," he said. "I have Effie Morice's place. Doubt if a velvet jacket would be congenial to it. I intend to have other people do my posing."

"Ha!" she cried. "Portraits?"

"Perhaps. At first."

"Me!" she laughed. "Please paint me."

He longed for her pronounced femininity in the intimacy of a studio, but he couldn't fancy his resolution surviving such continued contemplation.

"Ha!" she called. "The man doesn't want to paint me."

She started for the house. He followed her, his pulse quickening.

"I'd rather," he said hurriedly, beneath his breath, "paint you than any one in the world."

Was that quite true? Certainly there was no mediæval mysticism about Janet.

She turned and smiled.

"I'll not forget that—when you're settled."

He was alarmed that he had yielded to his impulse.

As far as that went, there was sufficient temptation even here. The abnormal warmth of that fall drew Wandel and Nicolas after dinner outside with their cigars. The little man appeared to irritate himself with a puzzle. Hal and Goodhue passed them and the nature of the puzzle became plain.

"As a very great artist, Nick, don't you think some shades of hair are really too pronounced?"

Immediately the graceful Grantley girl slipped into Nicolas's mind.

"You mean, Driggs," he asked seriously, "too pronounced for reticence?"

Wandel puffed thoughtfully at his cigar. Finally he nodded.

"Do you remember," he asked, "Hal's saying if he ever saw Halloran's beauty he'd probably wish he hadn't?"

"Yes. What are you driving at, Driggs?"

"I did think," Wandel said slowly, "that I noticed some striking ruddy hair in Hal's runabout last Friday."

"On Fifth Avenue?"

"On Fourth, but that's frequently less crowded. Ask Hal."

"Why should I? You mean you asked him."

"Naturally," Wandel drawled, "or I wouldn't be talking to you about it. Of course, I was wrong."

All of Nicolas's vague uneasiness, forgotten the past week, returned. He waved his hands.

"You were probably wrong, Driggs. Are you even sure she's still at the office, hasn't been urged to the powerful Clarice?"

"Hal," Wandel laughed, "has been complaining the young lady's too skilful. Seems Father's using her most of the time, and just as Harold had got her broken to his ways. I saw her down there the other day. By Jove! Halloran didn't exaggerate. Hello, Janet!"

Nicolas turned and saw Janet, a white wrap over her shoulders, walking toward them.

"Hot inside," she said. "Is this reserved for bachelors?"

"For gossips, Janet," Wandel answered. "Won't you join us?"

But he made an excuse almost immediately and drifted away, suggesting that idea, apparently universal, that Janet and Nicolas must be left together; and Nicolas, studying her through the obscurity, tinglingly aware of the warmth of her proximity, breathing her slight perfume that mingled with the odours of the damp night, fought a physical longing to complete his instinctive gesture of the conservatory.

"Why did Driggs run off like that?" she asked.

He didn't answer. In the radiance from a window he caught her smile.

"I'm not sorry he did, Nick. You're due for a scolding. Does the memory of the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne make Fifth Avenue seem shabby?"

"Why not say the avenue to Parnassus?" he grinned inanely.

She shook her head.

"Nothing in the world could be shabbier than that, and I'm not going to let you become a solitary tramp upon it, unless——"

"Well?" he asked. "Why do you stop scolding? I quite enjoy it."

Yet that was scarcely true. Her scolding increased his fear. She turned brusquely away.

"Unless we tire the returned exile," she finished.

He stretched out his hand, but caught himself, glad that she couldn't see.

"Preposterous!" he scoffed. "I have had a deuce of a time finding a lean-to."

She swung around, smiling.

"Then one may venture to hope to see you. One may ask you to fill in for a dinner—the opera?"

"If it's a good show," he smiled.

She came closer to him, looked steadily into his eyes, brushed his cheek with her breath.

"I'm not going to ask such things again. You understand?"

"What are you talking about?"

His hand rose once more, but she drew back, turned, and ran lightly away.

"Janet!"

"Nicolas!" she called mockingly, and, a provocative cluster of white draperies, disappeared in the house.

Nicolas was relieved when the others drove away the next morning. He was glad to follow that night, at last ready to resume his work after more than four years' interruption. He had no illusions about his ability. Athletic as he had always been, painting had attracted him from his childhood, and he had studied as he could until his mother had overcome his father's antipathy and encouraged him to go to Paris. In the atelier there he had won praise from masters whose custom it was to blame; yet now, as he paced Effie Morice's studio, he wondered if he would ever be able really to pick up the thread again. He unpacked his French sketches and stared at them helplessly. The hot beauty of which they were the notes had

gone to ashes in his mind. A number of times he tried to transfer one to canvas, to develop a picture that might interest some dealer, but the result would stare at him, line and colour as meaningless as the attributes of that woman of the theatre. What had become of all those compositions that had once flamed in his mind? They were buried beneath the memory of violence and degradation which alone he had brought alive in his brain from Europe. What then? Must he sit here helplessly, or go, as his father wished, among the ugly practicalities of Wall Street? Why not, instead, veil with fresh visions the aspects he had to forget? How could he lure such stimulation to his studio? There was that girl with the ruddy hair; something could be made of her, semi-religious, mystical, like a figure from verse in an archaic tongue—— What the devil was he dreaming about? He couldn't fancy her a professional model. Of course that was the only way he could ever paint her.

He avoided people. Particularly he wanted people to avoid his studio, shrinking from their wonder at his inactivity; but Wandel strolled in once or twice and appeared to notice nothing, and on a November afternoon the bell rang indecisively, and he went downstairs and with reluctance opened the door. In the alley stood Janet Ashmead and her cousin, Ethel Warden.

"Hello!"

He knew he failed to hide his surprise. Emancipated womanhood! Or, perhaps, Mrs. Warden or Mrs. Ashmead was near by; but, when he stepped out to see, the alley, except for himself and the two girls, was empty.

"Don't look so shocked, Nicolas," Janet said easily. "Aren't you going to ask us in?"

He stood aside, smiling.

"Certainly."

But the Warden girl displayed doubts of her emancipation. She hung back, giggling.

"Come, Ethel," Janet said. "You've been reading too many popular novels, or do you go to the cinema frequently? Tell her, Nick, that all artists aren't Bluebeards, that all studios aren't ogre's castles."

"My workshop—most dully respectable place," he muttered, but he was sorry Janet had come in just that fashion.

"It is an adventure," Ethel Warden giggled, and followed Janet in.

Janet looked curiously in the living-room downstairs—cheerful apartment with books, some carefully chosen furniture, and a day bed.

"Rather cozy," she said, "but I want to see the real abode of genius—the models, the north lights, the stained smocks, and all the stuff that thrills Ethel."

Nicolas pointed to the stairs, and shrinking from her discovery of his failure, followed her up. She stood in the centre of the big room, empty, save for Effie Morice's canvases piled against the walls, a model stand, a long table, a few chairs, and his scattered sketches. He read her wonder.

"I had expected to see hundreds of great paintings," she said.

"Isn't it exciting," Ethel Warden vapoured, "to be in a real artist's studio?"

Neither paid any attention to her. Janet stooped and examined some of the sketches.

"You don't," he said, "care much for those."

"They seem a trifle unfinished," she answered, puzzled.

He couldn't bear to have her think he couldn't paint. Certainly fate, or the mode of sophistication, had forced his hand.

"Perhaps," he said, "I've been waiting for my model."

"Why," she asked, "haven't you come to fetch her?"

"Getting settled," he apologized vaguely, "taking bearings. Trying to sweep Effie's lingering cerebrations from the studio."

He shut his mind to palpable dangers. He would prove to Janet and himself that he still knew his job. Her pleasant, rounded lines, her full colouring, her manner of dressing, suggested those fresh aspects he craved. He shoved the model stand close to the south wall. He placed an easy chair upon it. He picked up a piece of crimson embroidery and flung it across the chair.

"What are you doing?" Janet asked uncertainly.

He offered her an exaggerated bow.

"Preparing to paint a masterpiece. Please step up there and present the inspiration."

"Oh, Janet," Ethel called, "we really can't——"

But Janet's doubt openly emerged from a different source.

"Nick, you'll be thinking I came here for this. Truly, Ethel and I wanted to see what chained you from your friends. You haven't been seen——"

"But I'm going to be," he smiled. "I'm dining with the Goodhues and some people to-night. I shan't stay buried. Get up there, please—just for a few minutes to make a start. I'd like to block you in. It's your own fault, you know."

Ethel shook her head, gave little unintelligible cries of exostulation.

"You can go, if you want, Ethel," Janet said irritably, and, as if the other's anxiety had decided her, climbed to the stand and patiently let Nicolas pose her. He was in a panic lest Ethel should take her seriously and leave, but the young girl sat instead on the sofa and pulled at her gloves, staring about the room.

After a few minutes' work conventional thoughts slipped from Nicolas's mind. For the first time since entering this studio he felt himself in the mood for creative work. He could do a portrait of Janet that people would talk about.

As from an incalculable distance he heard Ethel muttering random, anxious phrases.

"Let's go uptown, Janet." "Nobody knows where we are."
"Janet! People will think we've been kidnapped."

At first Janet mocked her; then she, too, grew restless.

"Ethel's right, Nick."

"You mean you're tired," he said callously. "You're going to sit there until the light goes. Unfortunately that won't be long."

And he kept her until the blue of the skylight darkened.

"That's all for to-day," he announced with regret.

Ethel Warden sprang up.

"It's time. Let's rush, Janet."

But Janet descended slowly from the stand.

"I feel as if I'd been in a plaster cast."

"You had quite as much rest as is usual," he answered.

Ethel Warden had her feet on the stairs, but Janet walked slowly to Nicolas.

"I want to look at it, Nick."

"Nothing much yet," he explained.

For several minutes she stood at his side, her hand on his arm, studying the canvas.

"Are you ever coming, Janet?" the Warden girl urged.

Janet started.

"Of course. At least we must go on with it, Nick."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"I'll telephone or call," he said, "to arrange for sittings."

"Call," she whispered.

Her hand left his arm. She nodded, smiling at him. She followed the impatient Ethel down the stairs, out of the studio.

Because his father nearly daily reminded him of his promise, Nicolas was going about a little. Mrs. Goodhue's party included the theatre, and she had Nicolas at her side, but he was sorry she hadn't let him choose the play. He wasn't in the mood to sit through another evening of Clarice and her flock, and there was the plump and active Bamber girl dashing about as if she were playing a game and loved it with all her heart. He avoided boredom by dwelling on the thought of his reborn interest in his work. In his mind, Janet's finished portrait formed. His aunt brought him wide awake. He caught in her eyes a curious, surprised expression.

"Nick! Isn't that Harold Ashmead down there—in the second row, to the left?"

Nicolas turned.

"I don't see."

"Sitting," his aunt said, "next that girl with a great deal of lovely reddish hair."

Nicolas was swept by a wave of utter disapproval, a premonitory fear. What could Harold Ashmead be thinking of?

What could that girl be thinking of? There was no doubt of her identity, and Hal bent too close to her, was too attentive.

"Do you know her?" Mrs. Goodhue asked.

"Doesn't turn around," Nicolas evaded.

Yet, Nicolas asked himself, what was there actually to require evasion? Hal had, to be sure, leapt another fence. He ought not to have brought the striking Eleanor Grantley to a public place; but this musical comedy had long been popular with its jingles by a facile French composer, and Hal had probably taken it for granted all his friends had long since exhausted its charms. Wasn't there, moreover, something to be said for the girl? Was it more blameworthy for her to come openly to the theatre with a man than for Janet and Ethel to slip, drawn by curiosity, unaccompanied by an older person, to a bachelor's studio? He became conscious of a feeling of disloyalty to Janet. How could he possibly compare her with such a woman—Grantley's daughter, Halloran's pet, a product of high school and business college, an office girl? Anyway, it was none of his business; then Clarice with her slow and frozen grace caught his attention. Why had Hal chosen this theatre? It might be a good time to accept Clarice's invitation.

The audience left the theatre slowly, and there was a long wait for automobiles, so that by the time Nicolas had excused himself and said good-night the front of the house was dark. He hurried back through the alley and gave his card to the surly, masticating Cerberus. Without saying anything the man glanced around for somebody to send, then shuffled off with the card himself.

Nicolas waited impatiently. Had Hal actually taken the girl back to meet Clarice?

A rattle of feet on iron stairs attracted him, and he glanced up to see the doll-like Bamber girl descending from a fly dressing-room. Her face lightened. She ran over.

"Yvonne! Good-evening," he said.

"You've come to see me at last?" she demanded.

He shook his head, smiling at her pouting disappointment.

"Why don't you ever come see a fella?"

"Some day," he said glibly. "I'm after Clarice to-night, and some people she may be with."

"Won't find her here then," the girl said, "she made a quick getaway through the front of the house."

"Alone?" Nicolas asked.

"Nothing like it. Went with that Ashmead fella, and a pale, red-headed girl. Gee! I wonder how her hair gets that way."

"Perhaps," Nicolas mused, "I might pick them up. Did you hear by any chance——"

"Sure. Over to the Pantheon. Take a fella along."

He shook his head.

"But you shall have a taxi home—where you belong."

The warder shuffled up just then, returning his card without words; and Nicolas, after consigning his companion to the promised taxi, walked on to the noisy cabaret restaurant where Hal had taken Wandel and him several weeks before. It was more popular even than it had been then, and the crowd was rather less mixed. He surveyed the shoals of faces shifting about the floor or grouped around tables; and with an ease that marked her outstanding quality he separated almost at once from the forcefully gay multitude Eleanor Grantley. She danced with Hal with a natural grace that even Clarice might have envied. As in the office she looked up as if immediately conscious of his regard, met his eyes, then with a haste that suggested, indeed, he had caught her at an indiscretion, turned away.

The music blared into silence. Nicolas placed himself in the path of the two, and Hal for the first time saw him.

"Well!" he cried, attempting cheeriness. "Here's my very own favourite painter. Back to the white lights, Rembrandt?"

"I heard you were here," Nicolas said. "I felt restless. I didn't think you'd mind if I joined you for a few minutes."

"Decidedly not," Hal answered with that forced cheeriness; "Clarice is over here." But Nicolas noticed that he frowned as he went ahead, opening a path.

Nicolas walked close to the Grantley girl, but she wouldn't look at him.

"I had a glimpse of you in the theatre," he said. "Had you met Clarice before?"

She turned and faced him then, her eyes wide and pained with interrogation; her cheeks wavering with colour, her half-parted lips not quite steady. When she spoke the words came in a rush of emotion.

"Please take me out of here." she begged him. "Please take me home."

IV

TWO JOIN HANDS

NICOLAS looked at Eleanor Grantley, appreciating the problem she had given him; which he, when you came down to it, had put himself in the way of accepting.

"A minute," he muttered under his breath.

They were quite close to the table at which Clarice sat, dressed with an unusual command of effect and, as always, handsome in her bleak, unpleasant fashion. Why should she sit there alone while Hal danced with Eleanor Grantley unless she saw, in such resignation, a chance benefit for herself—perhaps an opportunity to go to some manager she desired to impress with the announcement that she had found a new and striking subject for his spotlights; a young woman who without training could at least be posed as the focus of sensational tableaux. Yes, managers of modern girl shows were grateful for such hints. Hal held a chair ready for Eleanor Grantley. She sat down, and it occurred to Nicolas that she had become as frozen, as calculating as Clarice.

The shepherdess looked up lazily.

"Why, it's Mr. Aldrich!"

Nicolas bent over the lifeless hand.

"How did you hit our trail?" Hal asked, frowning.

"Saw you at the play," Nicolas answered, "and went back after. One of those little things said you had all moved over here."

Hal turned to Clarice.

"Shall we shake a foot, lady?"

Nicolas watched them take a course for the floor, and he saw that Hal's expression was uncertain, contentious. Yet the party wasn't surreptitious. There was nothing exceptional in a

young man's supping and dancing with girls from the musical comedies in such a place. But Eleanor Grantley was not from a musical comedy. She was Hal's employee; and that cardinal fact, taken with what Nicolas had seen himself, and with what Wandel had said, unveiled in the situation cause for pronounced discomfort. Studying Eleanor Grantley's conventual features he couldn't fancy her capable of any harm, in a narrow sense. Then what the devil was she up to? His lips tightened. Did that brain nurse a fantasy that she could bring Hal to an uncalculating admiration of her elusive beauty? Then she didn't know Hal, that there were few men more calculating, or that he was eager to accept the destiny reserved for him. If the little fool dreamed she could trick such a man into a marriage she faced a harsh awakening. She startled him, speaking in a groping whisper.

"Why do you look at me like that?"

He felt a sense of guilt. Had she read his thoughts? Again he fancied she was on guard, playing a part, studying every line, every gesture.

"Shall we dance?" he asked brusquely.

She shook her head.

"You don't care to dance with me here," she said simply.

She could be disconcerting. He looked at her, thinking how pleasant and inconsistent it would be to lead her out on the floor. It was extraordinary what these women could do with cheap clothing. If, as Wandel had suggested, Mr. Ashmead found her useful, he probably paid her enough to let her indulge her excellent taste to a small extent. In her simple, straight blue gown, never intended, indeed, for evening wear, she outshone half the feathered women in the room.

"I should be honoured," he offered sarcastically.

He noticed that the towering glass at her place had not been touched, nor the rich food. She hadn't come here for those feminine symbols of a good time. She sipped some water.

"You won't take me home?" she asked wistfully.

"My dear young lady," he smiled, "why did you come at all if you want to make so hasty an exit?"

She had an air of asking him to answer his own question.

"I don't know, I don't know."

Perhaps she, as much as Hal, had hoped to avoid observation by particular people. She put her elbows on the table and bent forward, the colour wavering in her white cheeks.

"Once before you went out of your way to save me from a— a mistake."

"I'll take you," he said gruffly, "as soon as the others come back; but why do you call coming here a mistake? Don't you want to go because you're tired?"

She nodded quickly.

"I am very tired."

She turned from him, and, as if he were no longer of consequence, watched the floor, waiting for the end of the music to bring her release. Nicolas found sufficient interest staring at her profile. Always she offered his eyes of an artist a new aspect, a fresh stimulation; the newest, the freshest, the most compelling of all. He straightened as the others wandered back. Eleanor Grantley stood up to greet them.

"It's late," she said like a child reciting a lesson, "and I'm tired."

Hal, his manner still uneasy, indicated her glass.

"Tonic! Night's only commenced—eh, Clarice? Brace up. Got to dance with you some more."

Her head moved determinedly. Nicolas was caught by her readiness to combat Mr. Harold Ashmead of the firm of Ashmead and Warden.

"I've lots to do to-morrow for your father. I wouldn't shorten the evening, but Mr. Aldrich——"

"Yes," Nicolas said, "I'll run Miss Grantley home."

Hal's face was red, combative, and helpless; but Clarice let no emotion slip, holding out her hand.

"Been a pleasure to meet you, Miss Grantley. If Hal shows you the door come around and see if I can't put you on the track of something better."

Nicolas wanted to tell her to keep quiet, wondered why Hal didn't rebuke her. Hal said good-night with an assumption of

indifference; and, smiling back at him and Clarice, Nicolas followed Eleanor Grantley from the restaurant. On the sidewalk she faced him.

"Thanks, Mr. Aldrich. It's all right now."

He nodded to the starter.

"I shall take you home."

The wilfulness he had detected at the Battery became eloquent in her face, her attitude.

"I'm capable of taking care of myself."

"Kindly step in here."

The starter held the door of a cab open, waited questioningly. She gave Nicolas a resentful glance and accepted the inevitable.

"Your address?" he asked, following her.

She mentioned a number on the upper west side, and he gave it to the starter who slammed the door. Imprisoned with her in the narrow, dusky cab he had a moment's startled appreciation of her nearness, her helplessness. He wished she'd stop looking to him to repair her mistakes. She drew back in her corner and gazed from the window at the flashing lights. This continued silence made him ill at ease. He tried to speak indifferently and, as before with her, was aware of failure.

"How does your work go?"

Her voice was actually tired.

"Well enough, I believe."

"I gather Mr. Ashmead is quite monopolizing you. Isn't that a compliment, a promotion?"

"I suppose so. I wish you'd let me go home alone."

He resented her swinging the conversation back to that. He spoke with too little thought.

"The next time I ask you to lunch perhaps you won't refuse."

She turned, looked at him for a long time while he felt the hot blood in his face, then glanced away at the illumination of Columbus Circle. His amends came spontaneously.

"Shouldn't have said that, but I really wish you would."

"Why?" she asked.

He had no answer, because he couldn't tell her he always received from her a suggestion of Gothic, twilight backgrounds for a

dark-robed figure lost in rapt contemplation of impossible visions.

"Of course you're right not to," he said under his breath. "I don't mean with me particularly—— See here. You got rather more than you bargained for to-night."

She answered in hard, concise tones:

"You mean that woman—that actress?"

"You didn't like her?" he asked.

He fancied she shuddered.

"I—I know I'm absurd," she said in a sudden burst of confidence, "but I had a feeling she'd like to see me standing around—to be looked at——"

"Why not?" he laughed. "She wants contrasting types about her; but you said you wouldn't go on the stage."

"I wouldn't go on the stage," she repeated. "I couldn't."

And again he wanted to ask why not, but he knew she wouldn't tell him. Was it because she believed Hal would be more drawn to her as his father's secretary, a position she evidently had a chance of winning? Poor, pretty fool! Again he became impressed by her physical nearness in the obscurity of the cab. After all, she was a woman—like Janet. What was he thinking of? She was nothing of the sort. She was an unknown girl, daughter of a mother whose voice would cut glass, and of a father who was an optimistic scarecrow. He smiled.

"You had your father a good deal worried the night you ran off."

He realized he shouldn't have said it, and he fancied she looked at him triumphantly because he should have become interested to that extent in her movements; but her voice disclosed nothing; became wearier. He glanced out, to see how far up Broadway they were. He wanted to get away from this girl in whom he was interested really only as any artist would be in an unusual and stimulating model.

"Perhaps you think I shouldn't have done that," she said.

Before he could stop her she was defending herself.

"I didn't want to be a drag on my mother, and I didn't want my parents a drag on me."

She actually had then a destination in her mind.

"But they come to see me now and then——"

"Has your father found his place yet?"

She shook her head. A street lamp gleamed momentarily on her face, etching for him her smile, affectionate, comprehending, sorrowful.

"My poor father! But he hopes. All his life he's hoped. It is wonderful to be able to do that."

Nicolas asked himself cynically if she had inherited from her father that wonderful and outlandish optimism.

The cab drew up at the curb and he sprang gladly out, but she didn't see his hand. He glanced at the dreary row of brown-stone houses, remembering that a charitable friend of his mother's underwrote a number of working girls' clubs in this neighbourhood. He wondered if Eleanor Grantley had found her way to one.

"Thanks——" she began.

He waited, his hand ready to go out to hers, but her hands, he noticed, were hidden in the folds of her cloak; and she said nothing more, turning and hurrying up the steps. Was that farewell, too, studied? Had all she said in the cab been designed to draw him from an impersonal attitude? He drove away, shrugging his shoulders, telling himself he was fanciful, since certainly she had no cause for impressing him except as one familiar with visions she could only contemplate from a hopelessly remote and sombre setting.

Nicolas forecasted with a measurable discomfort his next encounter with Hal. In the broad daylight of his studio the following day he was sorry he had followed the strangely assorted party to the Pantheon, yet certain phases of Eleanor Grantley lingered in his mind, and he glanced more than once at the model stand, wishing she might follow Janet there. Why not? If he didn't get her some other artist might. A long, dark robe with many folds; hands crossed beneath her throat—— He shook his head thoughtfully. Her attitude toward Clarice hinted that she couldn't be made, even if she had the time, to pose professionally.

He picked up a sketching block and with crayons suggested her lines and colours, then threw the block impatiently on the table. He pottered about with futile work. He'd have to get Janet down again in a hurry.

Late in the afternoon he heard someone on the stairs and remembered he had left the alley door unlocked. He looked up, waiting.

"Any great talent at home?"

It was Hal's voice.

"Come on up," Nicolas called, and braced himself for an interview he fancied wouldn't be easy or pleasant.

Hal, twirling a cane, lounged to an easy chair, sat down, and glanced around. Nicolas smiled, for the other obviously didn't care much more for the interview than he did.

"Deeply honoured."

"Thought I'd look you up," Hal said, tapping the floor with his cane, "and see how Whistler whistles."

He added as an afterthought:

"Besides, Janet said this morning you were going to immortalize her charms."

Nicolas nodded, tense, still waiting. Then he saw Hal reach over, lift the sketching block from the table, and study it with drawn-in brows.

"What's this?"

"Not very successful," Nicolas said, "if you don't recognize the subject. Just a random sketch."

Hal glanced up.

"Of Eleanor Grantley."

"Yes. Jotted it down from memory."

Hal threw the sketch on the table and recommenced his tapping with his cane.

"From your memory of last night?"

"Naturally, Hal, running into her made me think of her."

"See here, Nick, you acted queer as Dick's hatband last night."

"Just how, my Harold?"

"I—I mean the lady's wanting to run off like that."

Nicolas laughed.

"I see what you mean. After five minutes' lonely conversation with me! Quite her own idea. In fact, I advised her to stay."

And before the other could say anything he asked quickly:

"What made you imagine I'd advise her getting out?"

"Let's come down to earth," Hal grumbled. "You didn't think I ought to have taken her there; you didn't think she ought to have come."

Nicolas lighted a cigarette, and threw the box to Hal.

"What difference does it make what I think?"

"Depends," Hal muttered, "on how many people think with you. You with the Goodhues last night? Never expected to run into them at that show."

Nicolas smoked, glad at last that he had gone to the Pantheon. He studied the other's attitude of a sullen culprit with satisfaction. His mother had told him that morning that the Morleys had arrived from England, that the Ashmeads were soon giving them a dinner; yet Hal could come here in an attempt to justify himself for encouraging the fantastic ideas of a beautiful but visionary girl.

"It did strike me," Nicolas said slowly, "that the pretty stenographer didn't hesitate to have her way in spite of the wishes of a member of the firm."

"Never mix business with pleasure," Hal said with a sickly grin. "See here, Nick, I only wanted to give that girl a little fun. Father's working her to death just because she's willing. Had a hard enough time, too, making her take that much relaxation."

"Why ring Clarice in?" Nicolas asked, "scarcely a chaperone."

"Hang chaperones," Hal said savagely. "Find out you're home. Nice girls go everywhere nowadays without chaperones—even to the very devil."

"But girls that aren't nice," Nicolas said sardonically, "can't afford such extended excursions. I'm not sure their escorts can, either."

"You mean," Hal said, "that people are talking."

"You wouldn't ask that unless you thought you had given people cause for talk. By the way, you seen the Morleys yet?"

Hal flushed.

"Yes. Yesterday afternoon. Had a cup of tea. Why?"

"Mother said they were back. Must look in."

"Deuced nice girl," Hal said rising. "Damned if you haven't made me uncomfortable, Nick, and hanged if I see why."

"I don't, either," Nicolas said, yawning.

Hal tapped the sketch with his stick.

"Don't see much difference. People might talk about that."

Nicolas laughed aloud.

"You self-conscious donkey! The girl would make any artist want to paint her. Let me point out to you that models for artists are practically inanimate."

"Try that on animals," Hal advised; "it's cruelty to men."

Nicolas shrugged his shoulders.

"Nevertheless, true as far as this artist is concerned."

At the head of the stairs Hal turned back.

"I just didn't want you making snap conclusions, young Rembrandt. The next time you see me bent on charity give me a word of praise."

"I've given you none of blame," Nicolas said seriously.

"Thanks. Some people would go to the top of the tower and bay. Far as that goes, whole family needs charity, and one would like to help them, but it's too difficult."

"You mean," Nicolas asked, "the old man's been down looking for a job?"

"Yes, and I don't think daughter was overjoyed at his coming. Of course, I had nothing for him. You can picture him about the place, what? Seedier than ever; and he'd lost his cheerfulness. Told me the story of his life. Seems he did have quite a tidy bit ten years ago and squandered it trying to make it into millions for his beloved daughter."

He smiled.

"Old fellow had the queerest ideas. Said he'd planned to make all the great men fight for Eleanor Grantley's hand—oh, perfectly serious, I assure you. Had all I could do to keep from laughing. And he ended by going through bankruptcy and living on the charity of his brother."

Nicolas was interested in spite of himself. Here might be a clue to Eleanor Grantley's most puzzling traits.

"Did you find out why his wife and daughter came here?" he asked.

"Old fish said the missus's family was poor, and she had a friend in New York. Admitted she wanted to duck the job of supporting him."

"Extraordinary," Nicolas mused, "he should wait ten years to find them."

"Evidently brother kept him out of the way until he died, then sister-in-law let him ride with a cheer. Utterly worthless old scrap! I gave him a letter to Driggs. He knows a lot of people who might slip him a job as doorman or something."

"Hope he lands something," Nicolas said. "Pitiful old figure! Can't help liking him."

"Seems to me," Hal leered, "you're rather interested in the submerged family yourself."

"Get out," Nicolas threatened, "and don't grow too charitable. Keep your fingers away from the fire."

"Right," Hal said, and added carelessly:

"Family's giving some kind of a shindig for the noble tribe of Morley. You'll hear from Mother. Better hold out Thursday."

Yet Nicolas wasn't sure he wanted to watch the wooing of his cousin. He liked Mary Morley, and he liked Hal, but in his mind the two didn't belong together, and he wondered to what extent that idea was traceable to the encounter of the dance hall.

Hal, indeed, the night of the dinner, gave one the impression of a suitor. He was humbly and patiently attentive to the long-limbed, light-haired British girl, who, on her part, appeared rather without bearings in the large party; and Nicolas wondered if that was because she had sense enough to guess what everybody hoped would happen; for, one heard, the Viscount hadn't left a great deal of what Mary Goodhue had taken to him.

Beau Ashmead had submitted himself to his son's hospitality. Wearing a sartorial triumph that even Hal might have thought a trifle youthful, he hovered over Lady Mary, a sweet but tired-

faced woman in half black. Nicolas chatted with her until Beau Ashmead shoved him away.

"He will flit about the girls," the gay old fellow chuckled. "Won't give you away though, Nick. What's the matter, Mary? You're a girl to me—a mere child."

He sighed.

"Wish I could court you again. Suppose I did? Give me another chance?"

She smiled at him indulgently, affectionately.

"Wonderful never to grow up."

"That's better than telling me I'm in my second childhood. Run along, Nick, and play with people scarcely in their first."

Nicolas laughed and joined the group about his cousin.

"My own Holbein!" Hal greeted him, and without affectation drew him close to the pretty girl.

Naturally Hal knew he wouldn't retail to Mary Morley gossip about dressing-rooms and cabarets; yet he speculated as to Eleanor Grantley's feelings if she could see just now her host of the other night. The sooner she found out the truth the better.

"When, master," Janet reminded him, "am I to sit again?"

"To find that out is half my errand here," he said.

"I won't bring Ethel next time," she promised.

Hal swung on her, grinning justification at Nicolas.

"Mean to tell me, Janet, you went to this man's studio accompanied only by the chee-ild Ethel? You're a nice girl! A nice thing to do!"

It worried Nicolas that Hal should still seek that kind of justification.

"Run along, Hal," Janet was saying. "It's a waste of time trying to be agreeable to your family and friends. They don't expect it of you."

On the way to the dining-room Mrs. Ashmead promised to suffer in the interests of art or Janet, Nicolas couldn't quite make out which; and a sitting was arranged for the following day. Nicolas was glad to find himself next to Janet at the table. She was exceptionally lovely to-night, and he caught his father from time to time glancing across at her admiringly. Reminded, he

drew a little into his shell, but Janet wouldn't have it, measuring his seclusion of the past few weeks with amusing chatter about people he knew. The women were going before he realized dinner was well started. Beau Ashmead slipped then into the chair next him. The old fellow placed a cigarette in an attenuated holder and smoked with gay gestures.

"Haven't seen you snooping around the hall with that little gel lately, Nick."

"What little girl, sir?"

Beau Ashmead chuckled.

"Ever see the right shade of red hair? That gel's hair is like a flame to attract the insects men are."

"Miss Grantley?" Nicolas said with admiration for the other's sharpness of vision and wit, but with resentment that he should so patently give him the task of keeping Hal untarnished for the family glory.

"Yes. That's the one—Alfred's new stenographer. He has a procession. He's too impatient to keep any one long. I caught you chinning with her in the hall."

He bent forward, tapping Nicolas's chest with his forefinger. His voice rattled horribly.

"You keep your eyes open or that rascal Hal will cut you out. Heard him asking her to go to lunch yesterday."

Nicolas started. Here was direct evidence that Hal, even after the interview in the studio and on the eve of this significant gathering, still tried to dispense his doubtful brand of charity.

"Mr. Ashmead," he said testily, "I scarcely know the girl, and one would say Hal's path among the feminine is pretty plainly blazed."

The lines of the wrinkled face tightened. The voice, for all its broken quality, became emphatic.

"Talk's cheap. Some day a young fellow'll try to touch that hair only to find that it can burn like the lake of fire. I know women. Had eighty-five years' experience. Don't laugh at me, Nick. Maybe I didn't begin studying them in my cradle, but I wasn't backward, either, and I always was nervous about

these slender, queer-coloured ones. Old enough to take chances with any kind now, damn it; and I'm fond of Alfred's red-headed gel. I stop in and chat with her now and then, and kind of keep an eye on the young blades about the office. My motto is, no sly lunches; no whisperings in the hall."

Nicolas thought quickly. If he spoke to Hal again he would merely stimulate an interest which, if left alone, would probably dissipate in the charming presence of the Honourable Mary Morley.

"I'd hazard a guess," he said, "that your red-headed lady wouldn't care for such things. She seemed a very nice girl of the sort."

Beau Ashmead's steady gaze made him a trifle warm.

"When I was your age, and where I came from," he rattled, "there were only two sorts—good and bad. Guess that was all wrong. Suppose if I told my grandson how I made my first few dollars he wouldn't speak to me any more, and I guess that's all right."

He raised his glass, and increased the wrinkles in his forehead.

"Not a very good lot of port Alfred laid in. Always hope he produces better when I'm not here."

He rose, tossed his cigarette in the fireplace, and disciplined his tie.

"Can't keep away from the ladies, Nick. Mary Goodhue's a sight for a stay-at-home like me."

"So's her daughter," Nicolas said.

"Hal's a better judge than me of that," Beau Ashmead pronounced, and wandered stiffly from the room.

Nicolas, even had he felt he could act on Beau Ashmead's hint, was too occupied with his own affairs to worry a great deal about Hal. In the morning he carried from the living-room to the studio his most comfortable chair, and arranged flowers, books, and magazines on the table for Mrs. Ashmead. The idea of a formal sitting was really stimulating, and Janet shared his feeling; but her mother was openly bored, yawning over palpably

unread pages, and drawing his mind from his work with questions he couldn't very well ignore.

"Isn't Mary attractive—so sweet and pretty? You saw something of her and her mother while you were abroad, Nick?"

"Few times I got to London."

And later:

"I wonder if New York will satisfy the Morleys after having lived in England? You ought to have an opinion, Nick, since you're a relation and were abroad so long yourself."

"Daresay they'll like it. Own people, and all that. Janet! You must not turn your head."

Or:

"These English girls do have something, don't you think, Nick; I mean, compelling to men, even very popular men?"

He made a meaningless answer, his shoulders drooping. How was it possible to paint with that anxious voice erratically loosing such questions? Janet's occasional chatter, on the other hand, really aided him, since it gave him new expressions to study, and helped him in his search for her inner character which he wished, as far as possible, to transfer to the canvas.

She undoubtedly read his dissatisfaction, for she brought a number of times younger and more thoughtful people, girls of her own period who had married earlier than she; but Mrs. Ashmead's questions lingered even when she wasn't in the studio. Evidently she had quite set her heart on that arrangement for Hal. Nicolas found himself wishing the engagement would be announced, for Janet's companionship nearly daily made Hal's sentimental adventures lose importance in his thoughts. Sitting there on the model stand, even in the presence of a third person, she projected an impression of thoughtfulness for him; of a beauty exciting even though it was quite without mysticism; most of all, of a compelling and abundant femininity. Yet at times he grew dissatisfied with his work, fancying in the face traits he had had no intention of putting there, that were clearly an injustice to Janet. He traced some of them back to his discontent that first night at what he had described to his father as her sophistication. Certainly she

was no more sophisticated than the majority of women he met these days, yet Mary Morley, who came once with Janet, seemed shy and different.

Janet, late one afternoon, on the point of departure, stumbled on his sketching block which her gloves, by chance, had covered. She picked it up.

"Allowable?" she asked.

"Certainly. Why not?"

He had forgotten his rough crayon of Eleanor Grantley on the top sheet.

"How extraordinary!" she enthused, then paused and looked at him. "But who is this pensive Beatrice?"

He walked to her side and glanced over her shoulder, glad that she liked the sketch. It wasn't a bad suggestion of the heavy, fatalistic Gothic thing he had had in mind. He could paint that girl. Too bad he couldn't possibly have her to pose for him.

"Now you'll laugh," he said. "She's a stenographer I saw in your father's office."

Janet tossed the pad on the table.

"Red hair! I know. Father talks about her wonderful fingers, but I didn't realize she was skilful enough to entice genius."

"Your painter thanks you, Janet. Don't you think her colouring out of the ordinary?"

But instead of answering she asked a question of her own.

"Maybe you don't know she's the girl who lived with the Hallorans, whom Hal rescued from some ruffian?"

He was surprised she should remember that. She dismissed the subject, looking at her own portrait which neared completion.

"You like it, Janet?"

She was doubtful.

"Wait until it's finished; then I'll tell you."

When she had gone he stared for a long time at his work, asking if she had seen those traits, quite beyond his technique, that had crept in in spite of himself. He had an instinct to

destroy the thing, to begin all over, to make her only as lovely and desirable as he wanted with all his heart to believe her.

That reminder of the Grantleys was the forerunner of another more startling, nearly incredible. A morning or two later as he walked down Fifth Avenue toward his studio he saw through the crowd, coming from the opposite direction a face, familiar, but at first outside his memory—the visage of a contented elderly man with a grizzled Van Dyke beard, trimmed with the utmost care, beneath a new and well-shaped dark felt hat.

“That’s what old Grantley might have looked like,” he reflected, “if he had hung on to his tidy bit.”

Then before he quite realized it the familiar figure had stopped, extended a hand in a courtly greeting, and spoken.

“Mr. Aldrich! This is fine weather for a stroll. A regular Southern autumn!”

The hand was gloved. Stained and threadbare clothing had been replaced by a new, well-cut suit. Nicolas tried not to make his amazement too pointed.

“It’s Mr. Grantley!”

But the other enjoyed his surprise.

“Always the best things come last. Awhile ago I was discouraged, but I had faith I’d get on my feet eventually.”

Nicolas smiled at the thought of Wandel who had evidently chosen to dispense charity.

“May one ask what you are doing?”

Mr. Grantley had clearly hoped for such a question. He glibly mentioned the name of a Wall Street brokerage firm.

“We have connections uptown. It is frequently necessary for me to visit one of our branches.”

Already he spoke as if he were a preponderating portion of the concern, yet Nicolas guessed he was no more than a runner, really too old for the work, and drawing a salary out of all proportion to his place.

“How long?” he asked.

“A fortnight, but I’m rapidly getting straightened out. I think it won’t be many days before I can remove my daughter

from drudgery that she has no business doing to surroundings more congenial—not palatial yet awhile, but I expect to advance. I must hurry on. The exchange is open too short a time.”

Nicolas nodded and continued toward the studio, restraining an impulse to laugh, not at Mr. Grantley; at Hal, who had sent the failure to Wandel. He hoped to move his daughter to more congenial surroundings! Hal would like that. If it turned out so, Hal would have been the instrument of his own defeat. It was a good solution, nevertheless. Mr. Grantley would probably make a simple home for his wife and daughter in some remote portion of the town, and Eleanor Grantley would slip quietly and permanently from all their visions.

He was glad Wandel and Hal came in that afternoon, when the light was fading, to irritate Janet and him.

“I wish,” Wandel drawled, glancing over his shoulder at the canvas, “genius had chosen to perch on my head.”

Nicolas swung around.

“At Princeton we all credited you with genius. This morning I admitted you had something more.”

“You worry me,” Wandel said. “Isn’t the very next thing insanity?”

“I thought of magic,” Nicolas laughed. “I ran into Hal-loran’s friend, Grantley.”

Hal looked up.

“Last time I saw him,” Nicolas went on, returning to his painting, “he was a tramp. This morning he had the appearance of a financier.”

He mentioned the firm that employed Mr. Grantley.

“What’s this, Driggs?” Hal asked.

“How should I know?” Wandel answered.

“I sent him to you with a letter,” Hal said. “Evidently you got him a job.”

Wandel stifled a yawn.

“Not I, Harold. A day or two after receiving your letter I ran into your revered grandfather and mentioned the matter. He said I might pass Mr. Grantley on to him, which I did. I know nothing more except that your grandfather happens to be

financing this firm which appears to appreciate Mr. Grantley's value almost unduly."

Studying Hal's face Nicolas wondered if Janet's presence didn't restrain him from saying unpleasant things about the patriarch. Instead he wandered restlessly around the studio.

"That accounts for it," Janet said.

"For what, sweet sister?"

"I believe they're to leave the Hallorans' ménage. Better speak to Father. If Grandfather's too charitable he may do him out of a good typist."

"Come on, Janet," Hal said irritably. "Too dark to paint. Let's all run uptown."

"You, too," Janet said to Nicolas. "You've earned a cup of tea."

Nicolas glanced at the portrait. It wouldn't occupy him much longer. Already, he admitted to himself, he had dragged out the work because he enjoyed Janet's presence in his studio. Why not go with Janet for a cup of tea? In a few days he would see her only occasionally in people's houses, and he hated to lose the temptation of her companionship. In the presence of this large party his impulses would be sufficiently guarded. Mrs. Ashmead added her voice.

"Take off that mother hubbard," Hal said, "and let's go." He nodded.

In the crowded rear seat of the limousine he sat next to Janet and resisted an impulse to clasp her hand which rested near his; and again he was glad her mother, Wandel, and Hal would be with them for tea. Wandel and Hal, however, asked to be set down at a club, and when they reached the house Mrs. Ashmead called upon her favourite ailment, put her hand to her head, and excused herself wearily. Janet led Nicolas to the conservatory and rang. He lounged in an easy chair and smoked, glancing contentedly at Janet; glad, in spite of his judgment, that people, whether through chance or intention, should have a habit of leaving them alone. Even in this glass room the light had the gray pallor of exhausted day.

A man wheeled in a laden tea tray. On the shelf beneath

were bottles and glasses. Janet made a cup of tea for herself and mixed some whiskey and soda water for him.

"Wouldn't you rather have it? You look tired, Nick."

He took the glass indifferently and sipped.

"You've been working too hard," she said.

"What nonsense!"

"It's true."

"And," he accused her, "you don't particularly care for the result of my labour."

She bent swiftly toward him.

"Please don't misunderstand what I said the other day. I really think it's an awfully good portrait, but it isn't all me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just that. There's somebody else in it."

"Who could there be?"

He had a vague idea she might say something about the sketch of Eleanor Grantley, but she answered seriously:

"Somebody with thoughts that aren't my thoughts. I don't know who—somebody all of whose thoughts you don't exactly admire."

He emptied his glass and set it down. Her tea no longer interested her.

"Are you accusing me, Janet, of criticizing you?"

She glanced away.

"Not me, I hope. Perhaps that other person."

"There is no other person," he said. "You know it as well as I."

She looked back and laughed.

"Then you admit you've seen traits in me you don't admire."

"I admit nothing of the sort. You're imagining things."

She bent close to him, shaking her head. In the conservatory the dusk was thicker.

"What difference does it make, Nick? Own up. You don't altogether approve of me. You didn't like my coming to your studio with Ethel. You didn't really want to paint me. Except for the necessary sittings you've avoided me."

Her voice shook a trifle.

"You don't like me, and I must confess that hurts——"

Her arm rested across her knees. Her hand hung close—quite close to his. He touched it with his fingers, grasped it.

"I like you, Janet—too much."

"Nick! You're truthful?"

"Truthful," he whispered, aware of the tightening of her hand in his.

"Janet! You're crying. Why?"

Slowly her head went back until her eyes looked into his, drawing him through the shadows nearer. He barely caught her voice.

"Because that makes me happy."

She raised her free hand. His head bent a little farther, and his lips met hers, warm, contented lips. After a moment she spoke.

"Nick! You love me?"

In the shadows with Janet pride had become less than an abstraction.

"Yes," he whispered. "You must have known it for a long time. You are glad?"

"Glad."

Smiling, she offered her lips again.

Dimly he caught the sound of someone walking in the farther room.

"What is it?" she asked.

Then she, too, must have heard, for she pushed him away and straightened quickly in her chair. Her movement gave him a view of the door. He saw with unbelieving eyes the figure of Eleanor Grantley, standing on the threshold, staring straight ahead with her air of rapt attention as if she saw objects beyond the visible world.

"What do you want?" he heard Janet ask in an annoyed, uncertain voice.

"Mr. Ashmead," the girl answered expressionlessly, "said I would find him here."

With a slow, deliberate motion she raised her hand, and Nicolas saw that she carried a notebook and pencils. Her glance

met his once then turned away to its contemplation of an unapproachable horizon.

Eleanor Grantley, it occurred to him, had intervened just too late to save him from a step he had decided not to take, that he knew he'd better not have taken.

V

DETOURS

NICOLAS, dining intimately at home that evening, partially sensed the involutions of his new state. The fire Janet and he had lit wouldn't smoulder in the pallid light of the conservatory; sooner or later it must blaze in open day; yet, with the knowledge of the family's need, even when Mr. Aldrich seemed to ask for it, he couldn't point out this comforting warmth.

"How is Janet's portrait coming on?"

His father nowadays used that groping manner in speaking of Janet; Nicolas borrowed it for his answer.

"Rather well, I fancy. No judge of my own job, though. I'd an idea the Planters and the Berrys were dining with us."

He caught the quick surprise and apprehension in his mother's glance. It was nonsense trying to blind her.

"Something gone wrong, Nicolas?" she asked quietly.

The scorn of his denial was genuine. How could getting the woman you wanted, whom people wanted you to have, be conceivably described as wrong? Then why didn't he let his father and mother share his happiness? Because of the implications it carried. Moodily he went with his doubts to his room. Lying back in an easy chair, his eyes closed, he reconstructed the dialogue of the conservatory, trying to find just where he had been at fault. With a wry smile he approached the truth. For a craving too long experienced he had abandoned his saner judgments, had heavily involved his future. Janet, of course, had been a dear about it all. Money, or its lack, hadn't been in her mind.

"Heaven knows this family has more than its share."

She had smiled, adding:

"Aren't delightfully respectable but lamentably poor men supposed to marry for money?"

"When they do, Janet, they remain poor and cease to be respectable."

He could see her amused face, almost mocking; could catch the persuasive quality of her voice, charging Europe with having distorted his reason; could feel her hand under his pressure, intended to make her understand.

"Don't say Europe, Janet. Rather some men and women who were driven so hurriedly from the house of custom they left their false faces behind. Must say, it makes one sort of wish to slide about on his own face. There's a wait ahead for us, dear. Better to keep it quiet until we can find our way."

Her smile was indulgent.

"You mean you're too poor to marry?"

"I mean," he corrected her, "I hate the idea of a lot of magpies saying I'm too poor not to marry, for that's rotten unfair to you."

"You forget, Nick, what numbers of people didn't go to Europe. Besides, silly male, you don't fancy I'd marry you to-morrow?"

Steps in the next room proclaimed another intrusion. She brushed his lips. He caught her whisper:

"Love seems to be for secret, guarded places. We'll have to run away."

It was Mr. Ashmead, pompously redolent of inner Wall Street, unconsciously suggesting the logical escape from the whole abominable difficulty. It was clear he guessed and was not displeased. For a moment he stood swaying in the doorway.

"Why not more light, daughter?"

Janet lay back in her chair.

"I hadn't planned a gala entertainment. You see there's no music, either, but I can offer tea."

Mr. Ashmead started, seemed on the point of flight, evidently decided to make his retreat more orderly. His tone was full and pleased.

"A sip out of that decanter. I'm whipped by the furies of the law."

While Janet prepared his drink and passed it to him the silence was too perceptible. He took it at a swallow.

"Where's that girl from the office? Your mother's dragging me about to-night. I must slip in an hour's work."

"She was here," Janet answered. "I told her to wait in your study."

"Clever one that!" Mr. Ashmead said, as though still covering his retreat. "Scarcely opens her mouth and does three women's work."

"Monstrous!" Janet mocked.

The jibing word, nearly the last Janet had spoken before his departure, all through the evening had clung to Nicolas's mind. He opened his eyes now, and stared at the familiar, comforting disorder of his room. There had, in fact, been a quality nearly supernatural about Eleanor Grantley's appearance at such a moment in the conservatory. Its memory retained for him a feeling of portent. He stirred restlessly, realizing how different his situation would be if just a little sooner her wraith-like figure had glided through the dusk.

He lighted a cigarette and puffed thoughtfully.

Although she had expressed nothing, the moment must have possessed a heady thrill for her—to stand, even with notebook and pencils, within that room at which she had lately gazed across a sea apparently unnavigable; to force him at last through such propinquity to the comparison from which he had always shrunk of two women from different worlds! And beside Janet's blazing and obvious beauty the oval face of Hal's damsel in distress had seemed more than ever filled with an elusive charm caught from the contemplation of unguessable visions.

That impression, he told himself, was only of passing interest, the detached admiration one might experience for an object glimpsed in a crowded, conglomerate store. The doubt that rankled was of how much she had witnessed of his impulsive moment with Janet. The fear that it might have been observed at all stained it with sordidness.

He glanced up, surprised at a knock at his door. In response to his summons his mother entered, and for the first time in his life, since her eyes still held the apprehensive look they had taken at dinner, he shrank from her intrusion. She came straight to him, sat on the arm of his chair, and placed her hand on his shoulder. There would be no evading now.

"Own up, Nicolas boy. What's a mother for?"

"To nurse odd fancies," he said, putting out his cigarette. She stooped and kissed his forehead.

"Something to do with Janet?" she asked.

He stared at her moodily. Why should this abrupt confusion of his plans relax the confidential bond between mother and son? She was pleading that it be kept taut.

"You've been with Janet so much recently; and at dinner I thought, when your father mentioned the portrait——"

He placed his arms around her, drawing her close, speaking in her ear, as if a louder tone might provoke a public clamour:

"This evening, Mother, Janet and I hit an—an understanding."

He had not foreseen her swift alarm, expressed in a cry, a forceful withdrawal from his embrace, a scrutiny prolonged and unbearable. He turned aside from it.

"I hadn't thought the idea would be so distasteful. I rather fancied you would like it. You once said Father wished something of the sort."

"Then why didn't you run home to tell us? Nicolas! It wasn't because of anything your father's hinted?"

"Scarcely. After all, Mother, you don't care for Janet?"

"It isn't that. She's been very sweet with me."

"You'll have," he said dryly, "plenty of time to grow accustomed to the idea. I'm in no position to dash her off to church. We'll have to wait."

He was puzzled by the relief that swept the misgivings from her eyes. She came close to him again.

"I'm so glad you're in no hurry, Nicolas."

"What is it, Mother? Why are you glad we are going to wait?"

She nestled so close he could no longer see her eyes.

"Because," she whispered slowly, "you don't love Janet, my son, as a woman must be loved for—for that."

Janet had, indeed, slackened the old bond, for his mother left him hurriedly, refusing to discuss her disturbing belief. He tried to dismiss it as envy of race, but it clung with the cunning and tenacious force of a maternal prescience. She had said she would bless any woman he might choose. He had never taken that very seriously, but there was no valid reason for her not blessing Janet; for certainly his craving of the past months was enough, or why, in the name of heaven, should he have outlined it as love to its object. Since his mother had raised this unhappy doubt it was just as well for her sake the public clamour would be delayed.

His father, he discovered in the morning, however, had been admitted to the secret. That, moreover, wasn't the last shock the day had in ambush for him. Mr. Aldrich's sloughing of his burden of worries, his expanding happiness, painted another sordid shade across the memory of the conservatory.

"Perhaps you're wise to wait, Nicolas, but, gad! you're to be envied. And Janet's had her share of waiting."

That momentarily removed the stain, suggesting as it did the persistence of Janet's affection, her avoidance during his absence of the innumerable importunities of other men; and, when he reached the studio, he placed himself before her portrait, purposefully accounting for the less pleasant traits that detached themselves from the beauty of the painted face. Her education had forced the selfishness upon her. The too pronounced knowledge of her worldly superiority had sprung from her environment. These were ephemeral faults, easily destroyed in the woman, if not in the portrait. The suggestion of a broad, cynical, and ruthless habit of discernment, on the other hand, wasn't so simply swept aside. Hang it! Didn't every woman share that taint in these wide-open days? He glanced at his sketch of Mr. Ashmead's office girl. At least it wasn't in her fragile face, which had room for no more than an incompre-

hensible wistfulness. If she would let him put that on canvas he might carry some fame, at any rate, to Janet. Anger seized him that there should be no reasonable chance. Since there wasn't, he wouldn't be driven again to a comparison, absurd, fringing disloyalty. He ripped the sheet from the block, with a quick tearing mutilated the impassive face, strode to the stove, and tossed the fragments in.

While the mood was on him he had an instinct to snatch up a palette knife and cut from Janet's colourful beauty the less admirable characteristics that could be obliterated in no other way. Would she approve, since she had detected and resented them herself?

He was glad when she appeared with her mother during the afternoon and swung him back to his temporary exaltation of last evening. She was breath-taking. His father was right enough. He was to be envied.

"Dear subject," he said, taking her hand, "you will sit long, but it may please you to know it will be for the last time."

She smiled significantly.

"Whatever you wish of me, master."

Mrs. Ashmead managed the last steps and walked straight to him, her face aglow. He shrank almost physically from her intention. She touched his cheek with her lips. She pressed his hands. She affected to brush a happy sorrow from her eyes.

"I am so glad Janet's hit on you, Nick."

He tried to keep his curiosity free of reproach. Janet turned to the model stand.

"Father," she said carelessly, "is wise in more subjects than the law. He faced me with it after you left."

"But I should have spoken."

"Don't fret," she advised, arranging herself in the chair.

"He'll give you plenty of opportunities."

Mrs. Ashmead released him.

"I think he's very fond of you, Nick. It's all right."

He smothered his disapproval. Of course it was all right. Didn't his own father and mother know? Families could be trusted to hold their own secrets.

As he worked his doubt evaporated in the sunlight of Janet's beauty. That moment last night had effected a change in her as well as in him. She showed a disinclination to meet his eyes, and she was over-restless, tempting him to frequent reproofs. He was amused, too, by Mrs. Ashmead's patent good will. She had an air of trying to vanish behind her magazine in order to leave Janet and him alone to the contemplation of their new rapture. Over him surged the desire to step forward and clasp again all that guarded loveliness in his arms.

With the fading light there were ringing steps in the alley and a crashing open of the door.

"What ho! Who dwells on Parnassus?"

"It's Hal," Janet said.

"Climb and see," Nicolas called.

He glanced up, surprised. More than one was on the stairs. Mr. Ashmead preceded Hal into the studio. His light overcoat, his shining gloves, his silver-headed cane in such shabby surroundings made him more than ever a symbol of pompous prosperity.

"We ducked past Marvin early," Hal explained. "Thought we'd pick you two up. Nearly through getting flattered, sweet sister?"

"Ask Nick."

Nicolas stepped back from the canvas.

"It's done—all but some touches for which I needn't make you suffer, Janet. You can see for yourselves there's no flattery."

"Mean you can't paint the lily," Hal grinned. "You're off to a flying start."

Naturally that was what they had come about. Nicolas wasn't unprepared to have Mr. Ashmead remain aloof from the gathering about the portrait. His attitude suggested more than opportunity; it was a command which Nicolas obeyed with a mental wavering comparable with the shaking of a child's knees before a difficult explanation; but Janet's father was jovially cordial. He placed his hands behind his back and leant on his cane.

"I suspected what you and Janet were up to last night."

"I should have said something," Nicolas began. "It was rather unexpected."

"What are parents?" Mr. Ashmead asked, shaking his head with a show of self-pity. "They count in such emergencies only when they disapprove. Therefore, I'm of no consequence."

"Thank you, sir. It's very kind because, really, I shouldn't have been so precipitate."

Mr. Ashmead started, studied him curiously.

"What do you mean?"

Nicolas indicated the nearly empty studio.

"I'm scarcely a success. I've not much to bring Janet. She understands we'll have to wait."

Mr. Ashmead commenced a tolerant laugh, then checked himself, perhaps comprehending something of Nicolas's view. One of the shrewd eyes wavered in a grimace almost bordering a wink.

"Did you ever stop to think, Nick, how rapidly one can travel under proper guidance in Wall Street?"

He glided over the suggestion, which reached Nicolas as a threat.

"Time enough to think of such matters. Love's all that counts now, what? I'm glad you're in no hurry. One looks forward only vaguely to losing a daughter. Hits one pretty hard. May find it out for yourself some day. Hang prospects! That's the only prospect that worries me."

The thought, Nicolas observed, brought no distress to the ruddy face. Mr. Ashmead permitted himself to be led quite cheerfully to the portrait.

"Must say you're there, Holbein," Hal approved.

Mr. Ashmead was judicially surprised.

"This is a very excellent portrait, Nick. I didn't realize you were so clever."

"Or," Hal scoffed, "that our sister and daughter was such a deadly beauty."

"It ought to be reproduced," Mrs. Ashmead ventured.

Nicolas glanced inquiringly at Janet.

"Her photographs fly about enough," Hal encouraged him.

Janet was eager.

"Certainly. I want Nick to get all the kudos he can even through insignificant me."

"I daresay," Hal said, "you won't mind being paid in kind."

His humour possessed a bitterness that escaped none of them. It troubled Nicolas most of all because he feared it might be traced to the understanding between him and Janet. Hal stayed back when the others went down the stairs, in fact, apparently to add to Nicolas's discomfort. He thrust out his hand.

"Felicitations."

"What's the matter?" Nicolas asked with a smile. "Don't you fancy me for a brother?"

"Not," Hal answered, "unless you keep away from dives like the Pantheon; not unless you limit your relationship to fraternal indulgence."

Nicolas laughed uncomfortably.

"So it still rankles! I thought I was indulgent enough that night. I'd an idea you'd overcome your taste for flaming hair."

Hal twirled his cane.

"Who says I haven't? There's all sorts of hair."

Mary Morley sprang into Nicolas's mind. Her hair was light, but he was willing to swear Hal hadn't been thinking of that.

"Get out," he advised, aware of an acrid distaste. "They're waiting for you."

Hal paused on the stairs and grinned over the railing.

"Be glad to know how it takes. Feet feeling all gummed up?"

Nicolas snatched off his smock and swung it at the unpleasantly mirthful face.

"Eternal happiness," Hal called as he went on down, "if there is such a thing. Don't believe it for a minute. Oh! Here I am, fond Mother. I loitered by the wayside to muse on love's young dream."

Nicolas sat down, frowning. Feet all gummed up! Wasn't fear of such constriction at the bottom of all his doubts? A rigid determination grasped him. At any rate, he wouldn't let

the Ashmeads entangle his feet in Wall Street. Janet could take what he had or wait. Aside from not caring to sacrifice his work to a scruple, he had no intention of being made the object of such charity as that queer old fish, Grantley, probably quite unconsciously, thrived on.

Feet all gummed up! Hal's raillery had been pitched in a bitter, a disturbing key. It had sounded a reluctance to have his own feet interfered with; it had hinted a shrinking from the duty everyone looked to him gladly to accomplish; and what would that mean to the Honourable Mary Morley, who beyond a doubt had been wise enough to guess her fate? The placid features of his cousin, it occurred to Nicolas now, had more than once recently been animated by an indecision bordering on suspense. Was it through his predestined relation with her that Hal had found the taint in legitimate passion? Nicolas was willing to swear she had occupied Hal's mind in no more pleasant manner when he had stood over there sneering at wedlock; but undoubtedly another woman had with whom there could be no question of marriage. He stirred impatiently. A temporary straying beyond the bars wouldn't make Hal less ready to accept the permanent corner of rich pasturage reserved for him. Someone might be hurt while he drove his way back, but, with the herd what it was, such accidents were inevitable.

Nicolas stood up and glanced around restively. He had the uncomfortable feeling of having forgotten an important task. The portrait reminded him that he would from now on have to keep his tasks straight enough. Decidedly, after the recent gathering here, what was done between him and Janet was accomplished beyond recall, but he was grateful that only the families need know for the present.

He paused by the stove while the nature of his task took outline. In destroying the sketch he had driven from his studio an urge to work that he must bring back. He recalled the resolution of that girl as she had stood at the Battery flinging her defiance over the water. Where was his own resolution? He had never asked her to let him paint her; he had merely as-

sumed she couldn't be made to do it because it wouldn't help her to the obscure goal she sought; but more than ever now he needed work, compelling, doubt-obliterating work. In justice to himself he must at least make an effort to get some of Eleanor Grantley's spare time. He hadn't forgotten the house to which he had taken her the night he had found her at the Pantheon. Janet was off to a dinner, and the evening held nothing. There was no point delaying. He snapped on the lights and in a rush of hopeful energy with paper and pencil schemed out an arrangement for a large canvas.

It was late when he left the studio, so he took time only to hurry home and change, then snatched a bite at a restaurant. It was, consequently, scarcely nine o'clock when a cab set him down in the depressing block where Eleanor Grantley lived.

In Europe Nicolas had been billeted in unlovely places. He had lived on terms of brotherhood with those whom poverty pinched; but, he reflected, as he climbed the worn stone steps, he had never more than glimpsed such conditions in his own country. For the first time, for instance, he was about to enter a New York boarding house, and he experienced the curiosity and the thrill of an explorer.

From the start he guessed his original hazard was right. Eleanor Grantley had managed to find a place in a house endowed for the better class of working girls. Instead of a servant, a matronly looking woman opened the door, and gave him out of sharp eyes a quick appraisal. Over her shoulder he saw a long narrow hall from which an oak-balustraded staircase climbed into darkness. He felt an amused sympathy as he took in the amorphous pattern of the oak hat-rack, the stiffness of its flanking chairs, the platitudinous framed prints that were rigidly spaced about the walls.

"Miss Grantley lives here?"

The woman smiled and nodded.

"If she is in," Nicolas said, "I should like to see her."

The woman stood aside. She indicated a double doorway over which flimsy curtains were half drawn.

"If you'll wait in there, I'll tell her."

She was about to turn away, but Nicolas, faintly puzzled, stopped her.

"Perhaps my name——"

The woman was bored, indifferent.

"If you wish."

He handed her a card; it was the fairer way, since Miss Grantley might guess his errand and prefer not to see him at all. While the woman approached the stairs he crossed the hall, pleased by the very informality of the house, suggestive in itself of safeguards. Patently the matron assumed no undesirable person would apply to her. Just the same, such a system wasn't free of dangers.

As he sat waiting in the living-room he smiled at the realization of other defenses. No undesirable caller would care for a rendezvous here, and his smile was swept away on a wave of dejection.

The formal attempt to make the large room, which ran the depth of the house, cozy and homelike, only added to its dreariness, its inescapable publicity. There was a round centre table covered with a cloth on which a few books and some newspapers, carefully folded, lay. Several smaller tables, surrounded by chairs, stood each in its appointed place. As in the hall, framed prints circled the walls with an inflexible air of performing an intellectual function. After glancing at the first he amused himself guessing at the subjects of the rest. He made few mistakes: the cathedral at Rheims, several views of the Forum at Rome, the Parthenon, a Corot landscape, Rosa Bonheur's horse fair, Joan of Arc listening to the voices, Raphael's Madonna of the Chair, a strikingly coloured thing of the lower New York skyscrapers, a large crayon of the woman who had opened the door.

Directly opposite hung a platinum engraving of Botticelli's Birth of Venus, and he found himself staring at it with a flushed interest, absorbing with a new fascination the oval, maidenly face, the heavy lustrous hair, the slender lines of a shrinking and virginal pulchritude.

If one could paint with that unaffected and slightly archaic

purity! He sighed and, still flushed, almost stealthily turned his glance to the animate occupants of the room.

He had chosen a corner by the front window, because most of his companions were at the centre table or in the rear. They were working girls, pleasant faced, unobtrusively dressed, sharing their evening with young men of their own type. A bridge game was in progress. Some bent over needlework. Others held books in their hands, and over all hung a vapour of chatter, nearly indistinguishable to Nicolas because of the remote post he had chosen.

He glanced nervously at his watch. Wouldn't she trouble to give him a personal refusal? Then all at once, with her noiseless ease she had entered and stood in front of him, comparing her symmetry and her questioning, meditative face with the Botticelli figure that hung above her.

"I hadn't expected to see you, Mr. Aldrich."

He stood up, enjoying the colour that swept her cheeks, and extended his hand. Again he received from her an electric sense of unsteadiness. The haste with which she drew her long fingers away suggested a fear that their weakness might compromise her.

"Good of you to come down, Miss Grantley, because I've crawled here to beg a favour."

"A favour! Not of me?"

The bewilderment of her face increased. He wondered how far it was studied. She sat down and clasped her hands in her lap. As he took the chair opposite and bent forward, he suffered an abashment he hadn't quite foreseen. He wanted to be quite sure the various groups from which curious glances shot couldn't hear what he had to say; nor was it easy to say it, for her very proximity increased his desire to get her to the studio, made him believe himself the recipient of a duty to make a permanent record of her charm.

She smiled wanly, perhaps to encourage him or to put a period to his too-prolonged scrutiny.

"Why don't you ask, Mr. Aldrich? You've done me some favours——"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Oh, yes," she said earnestly, "and I've not forgotten."

"You see, Miss Grantley, I remembered where you lived."

"And you won't tell me why."

Her inscrutable eyes, suggesting a boundless innocence, troubled him. He tried to speak lightly.

"I fancied you'd guess when you saw my card. Surely I don't need to tell you you're an uncommonly fascinating study for a chap of my trade."

Her eyes filled with startled interrogation. The colour came momentarily back to her cheeks. Although she made no movement he was acutely conscious of her recession, and tried to hold her.

"I don't mean you to think me conceited. Has no one told you I daub paint on canvas?"

"Who would?" she asked.

Evidently Hal hadn't, probably having hit on more congenial subjects.

"I paint pictures," he said, "preferably of people, when I can get them to sit for me."

Her hands stirred in her lap. Her eyes grew wider, less easily read. He couldn't be sure the irony of her response was intentional.

"It's almost like that night when you brought me here."

"Don't confuse me with Clarice," he begged.

Her shoulders moved as from sudden cold.

"You've sense enough to see," he said rapidly, "it's not at all the same. Every painter has a type he's on the look-out for. I believe I've wanted to paint you, Miss Grantley, since my first glimpse. You've my colour and my line."

He glanced at the Botticelli and smiled. It might be as well to make himself clear.

"I've a scheme for the figure of a woman in long robes, hands clasped, against a sombre, half-seen background. For that picture there is just you. You've no idea how grateful I'd be if you'd give me a lift. I daresay you're already working hard enough, but if you could manage an hour in the early mornings

now and then. It would only mean breakfasting a trifle sooner, and, while I'm no Croesus, there'd be just that much more for your weekly budget."

She didn't answer, and he grew more and more ill-at-ease beneath the scrutiny of her calm eyes until he was sorry he had come at all, angry he had exposed himself again to the calculated impassivity of this woman which always lifted her from her normally inferior plane to a level of disturbing personalities. It was an effort to speak without exasperation.

"Won't you answer me? Be kind enough to say yes. It would help me more than you know."

She sighed and stood up, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Aldrich."

She stepped aside—a calm and purposeful dismissal; void of impertinence; expressive of regret, not that she couldn't agree, but that he should have imagined her capable of coming to him as a model. His vexation grew; he wouldn't be so easily put in the wrong; he wouldn't go until he had smoothed away his awkwardness. Even though she were a stray body sweeping momentarily from the great outer void, he wanted no distortion of her flashing glimpse of him.

"One minute, Miss Grantley. I wish you to understand—a semi-religious thing."

Her lips parted in a smile of understanding.

"All the robes and heavenly crowns imaginable wouldn't make it any different. You must realize I would find it far more profitable to pose for Clarice."

"But scarcely so useful," he objected. "Come, sit down while we talk for a moment of something less repugnant."

She returned to her chair, clasped her hands again in her lap, and waited attentively. After a time she looked away.

"You see there's nothing else."

He detained her with a gesture. He felt himself flushing, then all at once found himself with a sensation of unexpectedness embarked on a defense of his not unnatural request.

"Don't blame me if I still stare at you as a possible model."

You've given me a nasty disappointment, because I've no idea where to look for any one quite like you."

"Thanks," she murmured.

Irony again? Her eyes told him nothing, seemed more inscrutable than ever.

"I've made a sad failure. If I shouldn't have come at all, forgive me. I ought to have known. How could I hope to detach the minutest portion of your interest from the law? Perhaps you'll let me congratulate you on your progress."

"Because," she asked quietly, "you saw me at Mr. Ashmead's yesterday?"

Was there a wavering about those deep eyes now? He retained his own impassivity with an effort. Was it lack of breeding that made her so disconcerting? What had she witnessed of his and Janet's unrestraint? The stain came back to his recollection of that moment.

"That does mean, doesn't it," he rattled on, "that you've made a tremendous hit with the Czar?"

Her voice was contemptuous.

"It means that I take my work a little more seriously than the other girls. They behave as if the thing were a matter of compulsion. They're like school children, counting the minutes to the dismissal bell."

Her glance strayed to the orderly heap of newspapers on the table.

"They waste hours gossiping about unimportant things."

He had followed her eyes.

"I know they buy many editions, but do you call the news unimportant?"

"Some kinds for some people. You've no idea, Mr. Aldrich, how much time working girls waste reading about and discussing people like you."

Confound her! She seemed mildly amused.

"Like me? I'm far from famous."

"They used to call it," she said, "the four hundred, didn't they?"

His face lightened.

"I see what you mean—the people who get in the papers. It's the forty thousand nowadays. But you're not serious."

"Perfectly. And don't imagine they can't sort the forty thousand. Of course one can't help listening, but I prefer to attend to my work. That's the reason Mr. Ashmead gives me more to do."

He knew his feet touched forbidden ground.

"And that's all you want—more to do?"

"At least I told you once what I didn't want."

So she hadn't forgotten their surprisingly intimate chat at the Battery. The thought was a stimulation to further intimacy. Why not, since he thought it worth while to sit with her at all to gloss over his earlier awkwardness?

"But I ran into your father the other day. He seemed in a position to give you most things you might wish. He told me he had landed a glittering job."

He caught the sudden understanding and affection released by her eyes.

"Isn't it fortunate for him? I think he's happy for the first time in many years."

"And," Nicolas said, "his chief idea seemed to be to make you happy. You'll soon be leaving here?"

Her face tightened with determination. He shared her rapid survey of the room; absorbed with her its ugly furniture, the snobbishness of the pictures, the unsuccessful struggle of its occupants to appear comfortable and at home.

"I am going to stay here," she said.

The very naturalness of her voice informed her words with a purpose, arresting, nearly violent. Then, no matter how much change was slipped in Grantley's pockets, Ashmead and Warden wouldn't lose her, she wouldn't dip just yet beneath Hal's broad horizon, she wouldn't cease to glide about the Ashmead house. But would she continue to irritate Janet? Would she persist in projecting an impression of warning to him?

"You admire this so much?" he asked, surprised and uneasy. She moved one hand; she spoke indifferently.

"You know I lived with the Hallorans. When you've found

even a garage preferable to two rooms on Third Avenue, with the elevated roaring and shutting off the light, and the sort of people you'd see there—— Why shouldn't I admire this place, Mr. Aldrich?"

"I'm sure," he said with conviction, "I don't know why you shouldn't, but I'm equally sure you don't."

She half closed her eyes, and again he had a sense of withdrawal. Impulsively he tried to bring her back.

"Perhaps you'll tell me why you stay."

"Because," she answered from that vast distance, "I've learned it's safer to depend on yourself."

For what? The only quest he could assign her would lead inevitably to unhappiness, to disillusion, to worse things of which he didn't care to think. He wanted to urge her to abandon such ambition, to accept the harbour Beau Ashmead's money had opened, to choose there one of her own kind who would keep her safe and, perhaps, make her happy.

Studying her now, he had a deep sympathy for her reluctance. She knew what a mirror was for. She must realize how striking she was, with traits more compelling than beauty because less usual. She was too good for the chauffeur, John; perhaps too good for any of the men she must accept as an alternative to marooning or shipwreck. He arose impatiently. There was nothing he could do. Since she wouldn't accept Beau Ashmead's charity, she could be trusted not to touch his. He had remained long enough. He had paid sufficiently for whatever embarrassment his original request had brought her. He had a quick thought that it would be better, since she wouldn't pose for him, if he should never see her again. But now it was she who held him, rising, coming close, whispering the question that he might have put to her with an equal curiosity.

"Why do you make me talk to you as I don't mean to?"

He laughed.

"You don't fear you've said anything indiscreet?"

There was plenty of colour in her face now.

"I don't know. You've caught me at too many indiscretions, Mr. Aldrich, since that first night in the Park."

"With the dashing, unknown admirer?" he said dryly. "It occurred to me you took quite good care of yourself that night."

She turned away and glanced down. Even the delicate lobe of her ear seemed trying to match in colour the ruddy, rippling hair that curved about it.

"And you don't think I did the night you brought me here from the restaurant?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask:

"What earthly difference does it make what I think?"

Instead he said nothing, until she turned, her face laughing, her voice full of banter.

"But you'll keep my secret as you did that day in the office, Mr. Aldrich? You won't give me away?"

He wouldn't surrender to her knack of drawing one beyond one's depth.

"I've no idea what this secret is, so I can't possibly give it away."

He held out his hand. With her manner of not wishing to, she submitted her fingers to his grasp.

"I'm glad," she said, "because you're too important a person to be carrying around wrong impressions."

He started for the door.

"I'm not important. You didn't even know I painted."

"Didn't you understand?"

He turned at her surprised tone.

"I thought I told you I looked at the paper, too, when I heard the other girls."

"I haven't the remotest idea what you're talking about."

She stood near the centre table. Her hand went out uncertainly and touched the heap of newspapers. She turned over a page.

"Even here they discuss such exalted news."

He went to her, assuring himself he didn't know what to expect, and glanced over her shoulder. From the page stared up at him a crude reproduction of one of Janet Ashmead's photographs.

The caption sprang at his startled mind.

Miss Janet Ashmead, society heiress, engaged to prominent young New Yorker.

Then families couldn't be trusted to hold their secrets! Without pausing to stalk the blame, he snatched up the paper.

"Mr. Aldrich! You don't mean to say you didn't know it was there?"

That aroused him to the necessity of veiling his temper from this impertinent office girl who all along, it seemed probable now, had been laughing at him.

"Worked late," he explained easily. "Frequently miss the evening paper. Perhaps you'd forgive my glancing at this——"

She waited, leaning against the table while he read the article. It wasn't, he saw at once, a paragraph of social chatter. They had treated his engagement as an item of fairly important news.

"Although no formal announcement has been made, it may be stated on unquestioned authority that Miss Janet Ashmead, of — Fifth Avenue, will be married, probably in the late spring, to Mr. Nicolas Goodhue Aldrich.

"Miss Ashmead is part heiress to one of the largest American fortunes. She is a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Mitchell Ashmead, and a granddaughter of Henry Clay Ashmead. She is a niece of Simmons Warden and a cousin of Jonathan Berry.

"Mr. Aldrich returned recently from Europe where he served in the American Field Ambulance, and later as a captain of Field Artillery on the Vesle and in the Argonne. After the Armistice he devoted nearly two years to relief work in Central Europe. Before the war he won considerable reputation as a polo player and may develop into a possibility for the International team which will play at Hurlingham next June. He is a member of the following clubs:"

With a growing aversion Nicolas glided down the list. They hadn't omitted anything, and here were his family connections, even to the Morleys. Gad! What impertinence! What a prying into matters that were of no interest outside a man's

own home! He felt like one struck unexpectedly from the rear; and who was responsible? It ought to be simple to narrow the circle of possibilities. The paper, indeed, seemed to do that for him. Mrs. Ashmead had refused to see a reporter. It had been impossible to reach Mr. or Mrs. Aldrich. More definite information would be forthcoming later. It made no difference. Someone had told. Papers didn't risk such hazards.

In the rear of the house a bell rang. It was a reminder. He glanced up.

"Thanks," he said.

Eleanor Grantley nodded.

"You may have it."

"Why should I wish it?" he asked.

He stared at her as one who abruptly becomes aware of an astonishing companionship. He had called, he reflected with a displeasure born of that article, to hire this woman to work for him, and he had remained to share with her an incomprehensible intimacy.

"I must be off."

He didn't offer his hand again. Her eyes wavered.

"I'm sorry."

For a flashing second he dreamed she referred to that disreputable article, but she went on quickly.

"I'd like you to paint my portrait, Mr. Aldrich, if it could be thought of. I'd feel better if you would tell me you understand how impossible it is."

"No matter, if you change your mind you can communicate with me easily enough."

He looked at her, puzzled. Her contrite expression had vanished. Wide-eyed she stared over his shoulder at the entrance. He saw her lips move hurriedly, caught her appeal.

"If you don't mind—stay just a minute—until I—I can slip away."

"The woman said I'd find you here, Eleanor."

He had heard that concerned tone before. He turned on his heel and saw just across the threshold the bulky figure, the anxious, angry face of the man John.

Nicolas had never dreamed of finding himself, however in-

nocently, in such a position. Some of the suspicion in John's eyes was directed at him. The bridge players and the girls with needlework or books had ceased their occupations and, doubtless, summoned by that heavy voice, had glanced up expectantly. The man was in the habit of drinking and he was headstrong. There might easily be a scene. It was what one deserved for coming to the house; for remaining to chat familiarly with such a girl. After all, she must be responsible for John's passionate insistence, yet she had the effrontery to ask Nicolas to stay, to take it for granted he would help her escape the trap. And he would. Hang it! there was nothing else to do.

"Don't worry," he whispered gently, as from some outside dictation.

But all the uneasiness had left her face. She took a step forward and spoke pleasantly.

"I'd no idea you knew where I lived, John."

"Might surprise you if I told you how I found out," John answered. "Good-evening, Mr. Aldrich. I didn't expect to see you here."

It was reasonable John should step up from his proper place. What became of social distinctions when two men stood in a tawdry boarding-house parlour, one on either side of a pretty woman? The newspapers liked stories of that sort, too. With an effort Nicolas kept the proper values.

"Evenin', John. One gets about."

"Mr. Aldrich," Eleanor said, "has been kind enough to offer me some extra work."

He hated the idea of her trying to protect him; resented the skepticism in John's eyes.

"You were just going?" John asked.

"In a moment, John."

Nicolas motioned Eleanor Grantley to the door, and held the curtain aside.

"Run along," he whispered with a whimsical smile. "I'll make your apologies."

"It's merely that I don't care to speak to him. I'm not afraid. I—I can take care of myself."

"I doubt it," he laughed, and turned back to the expectant John.

"Where's she gone, Mr. Aldrich?"

The occupations of the room still lagged. Why did the man have to bellow?

"It's rather late, John. I fancy she's said good-night to us."

"She isn't coming back?"

"She isn't coming back."

The chauffeur stiffened. His coarse face became suffused. Nicolas knew the moment had arrived that would determine the manner of his exit from the house; more than likely the question of Eleanor Grantley's remaining there at all. He didn't permit his glance to waver from the other's threatening eyes.

"Perhaps," he said easily, "you slipped over in one of Mr. Ashmead's cars."

That ought to steady the man and get him back to his place; but John with fresh recklessness flung off the habit of servility.

"What if I did?"

Nicolas smiled slightly, continuing to hold his eyes.

"Because if you did, John, it would be convenient for you to drive me home."

And after a moment:

"I gather you have the car. Suppose we make a start."

John's eyes vacillated. He nodded, speaking as though Nicolas had put the words in his mouth.

"As you wish, sir."

He turned, went into the hall, and held the front door open while Nicolas passed through.

The semi-darkness of the streets released him to an extent from Nicolas's dominance which was built on years of habitude; and it was, in a sense, unfortunate that he had brought Hal's runabout, since it placed him too confidentially near his conqueror.

"Tough, Mr. Aldrich," he said, shaking off the fetters, "to be turned down by a girl who wasn't too good for you a little while back."

Nicolas was ashamed of his curiosity. He wanted John to

continue. He said nothing, but after a moment the man muttered on, slipping from more confinements.

"Her mother thought I was good enough; led me on, the old lady did. Good enough to take her to picture shows, and to the Yorkville. That scarecrow comes along. Says, 'What you doing living over a garage? What you mean walking out with a paid chauffeur?' God!"

He spat over the side of the car. His voice strengthened with a threat.

"Let her throw me down. I know the way now."

Nicolas argued against his growing concern. What could John do? Eleanor Grantley would tell the matron not to admit him again. Eventually some fluffy, shrilly laughing little creature would replace his present passion with one more suitable. But meantime? The man hadn't been drinking. That was the disturbing factor. His attack on the boarding house had none of the quickly vanishing urge of intoxication. Nicolas stifled a yawn.

"I don't see why I'm not interested in your amours, John. I'm really only anxious to get home. Don't you think you gave that motorcycle chap rather a close shave?"

John's tone was vicious.

"Let him look after himself. That's what people have to do in this world. I'll take a licking fair from anybody, but I won't take it below the belt—I wouldn't take it that way from the richest man in the world."

"I'm not trying to make a train, John. Besides, I'd enjoy lighting a cigarette."

The speed of the car slackened, but the airing of the driver's wrongs was unabated; and Nicolas's anxiety increased because of elements in the situation less obvious and more threatening than any annoyances John might bring Eleanor Grantley. They were vaguely woven with his experience over the seas, and caught up with them was his home-coming impression of an ominous alteration in his own land, among his own people. The ungenerous narrow-mindedness he had noticed wasn't confined to the men who had made self-seeking pay. Its contagion evidently had ravaged the submerged, who, in order to make it appear to

pay, would claw at the fundamental social fabric until the disease might, indeed, assume the mortal devastation of a plague.

John was at that now. No matter what his temper he wouldn't have ventured before the war to talk to Nicolas Aldrich in this fashion. "Keep me or kick me out," his attitude connoted, "but I'm going to have my rights even though I have to give it to you Olympians straight between the eyes." Then Nicolas's more immediate fear surged back, for John did, in fact, give it him between the eyes.

"Sorry, Mr. Aldrich. Expect I'll get mine for shooting off my mouth, but I don't give a hang. All I care about's that girl. You got to own up men of your kind ain't running after her for any good."

"John! You're not using your head."

"Yes, I am, and I don't mean you. I should hope that was different."

Nicolas couldn't help a smile. So even John had seen the papers, and assumed that for the moment a call from him was without sentimental perils for any young lady.

"You know, John," he said, "you're rather going out of your way to ask for trouble."

"Oh," the man said, "I can always hook on to another job. Besides, I'm not so sure Mr. Harold would care about bouncing me. I know a good deal."

"Sounds like blackmail," Nicolas laughed.

"It's the truth," John said with a vicious sting in his voice. "How do you suppose I found out, Mr. Aldrich, where she's living?"

"No idea," Nicolas yawned.

Then he sat back in his seat. The cigarette slipped from his fingers and fell in a shower of sparks on the asphalt. He hadn't expected to get it quite so straight between the eyes.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Aldrich. I followed young Mr. Ashmead over there last evening. He stayed for nearly two hours, and he walked both ways across the Park, so no one would know what he was up to. Don't you think it's time somebody looked after her? Well, job or no job, I'll take a hand, by heaven."

VI

SENTIMENTAL SHADOWS

AT HOME Nicolas loitered in the hall, slowly removing his coat with the bewilderment of one who has emerged shaken from a sudden disaster. The knowledge that Hal made surreptitious visits across the Park when he was supposed to hover on the edge of a declaration to the Honourable Mary Morley was less disquieting than the logical intention of his course, for he wasn't one to twirl his thumbs in a deadly, crowded boarding house parlour to divert the indigent. Undoubtedly he paid instalments on the prospect of more congenial, less-restricted calls. Whether he'd actually attain them was another matter. John, who had taken a hand, seemed the immediate menace, since with his new ideas of a selfish equality, strengthened by his honest, hopeless love, he was capable of loosing about their ears a scandalous and reverberant outcry.

Nicolas shook his head, appreciating the futility of the half-humorous warnings he had given the chauffeur. It didn't do, he had pointed out, to force one's services on ladies who mightn't care for them. Sometimes the police set one right, as they were sure to take a hand at a breath of blackmail; but John had been in no mood to forecast consequences. Nicolas shrugged his shoulders and went upstairs. In the door of the library his own worries sprang to life.

Mrs. Aldrich sat alone in front of the fire at which she had apparently been staring for a long time. An evening newspaper lay in disorder on the floor at her side. Nicolas kissed her and stood with his back to the blaze, reluctant to sit down.

His father, it appeared, had gone to spend the evening at his club for the first time since his misfortune, probably to hear the great news discussed.

"You're home early, Nicolas," his mother said inquiringly.

"Only ran across town," he answered, "to try to get a model I wanted most awfully."

"Too busy?"

"Yes. She's a stenographer, sort of secretary, at Ashmead and Warden's. Never posed, and didn't care to break the ice. Just my type."

His mother's voice held too much sympathy.

"I'm sorry you didn't get her, Nicolas."

She stooped, picking up the paper, disclosing the real cause of her commiseration.

"You've seen it, dear?"

"Yes. Took me off my feet. I'd supposed, as I told you, nothing was to be said for the present. You don't imagine Father——"

She shook her head.

"But he thought it the thing."

"Wonder if they let Beau Ashmead in. Old fellow would be equal to expressing an opinion in public."

Again she shook her head, all the vitality gone from her face.

"Don't try to fix the blame, Nicolas. Even when a few people share such news it's likely to slip without any one's knowing quite how."

She sighed, glancing about the room as if its guarded, nearly antique polish had been a trifle tarnished. Her words vibrated with two meanings.

"At any rate, it's gone beyond recall now."

She turned back to the fire.

"I've been thinking, Nicolas. I shall ask the Ashmeads for Tuesday night—a quiet, family dinner. Aren't you pleased?"

He started.

"Certainly. You're very thoughtful."

He didn't linger. He couldn't bear to remain in that room

witnessing the final relaxation of the bond that had always held him so close to his mother. It was too much like standing helplessly beside the deathbed of someone well-beloved.

His father had foreseen the spirit in which the announcement of his engagement to Janet would be received, and Nicolas for a time avoided the clubs where his friends collected; but he couldn't help encountering people who congratulated him candidly while their envy slipped through. He stumbled, of course, on exceptions. His cousin, Dicky Goodhue, for instance, seemed to think it a normal and sensible way out of his embarrassments; and Driggs Wandel, who took the trouble to come to the studio, certainly had no envy, nor cause for any. He patted Nicolas paternally on the shoulder.

"I always knew it would happen, so the news fairly bowled me over; the things one is certain will occur so seldom do."

The Honourable Mary Morley appeared to find in the prospect a quiet and helpful satisfaction, but it was old Beau Ashmead who varied most pronouncedly. One afternoon when Nicolas waited for Janet in the conservatory at the Ashmeads' the mummy-like man strolled in, jauntily twirling his cane.

"Hello, Nick! Grayson told me you were here. Thought I'd better do what's expected of a grandfather. You're joining our firm, eh? Guess you might do worse."

In his throat rattled his singular and sardonic mirth.

"Although I wouldn't swear you mightn't do a lot better. Grandfathers aren't deaf and blind like young love. A lover has to wait until the wedding to find out whether he's landed in honey or vinegar. Ought to warn you Janet has a sharp temper and likes to get her own way."

"Grateful," Nicolas smiled, "although my sight and hearing are normal."

Beau Ashmead pointed his cane.

"That so? Then I'd better tell Janet you're not in love."

His odd merriment loosed another rattle.

"But you can't take me in. It'd be an awful thing for the parsons and the unborn if wooers could see straight. No mat-

ter. Congratulations are looked for from the family. Take mine for what they're worth."

Nicolas tried to hide his discomfort, for the world knew what Beau Ashmead's congratulations were worth—a good many millions. The infused eyes narrowed.

"No more flirting in the halls with red-headed typewriting gels, eh?"

"Never began," Nicolas answered testily.

"Ho, ho," Beau Ashmead exploded. "You're so innocent whenever I mention that red-headed stenographer, I'm not sure I oughtn't to put a bug in Janet's ear."

Nicolas took his revenge with satisfaction.

"Will Ashmead and Warden keep her long?"

"Why not? Why not?"

"Ran into her father the other day," Nicolas explained. "Most startling transformation—full of prosperity and plans. Spoke of making a home for his family, red-headed girl and all."

He had scored. Beau Ashmead turned away, muttering:

"If food was cheap as talk there'd be no famines."

He swung back, his eyes suspicious.

"Why do you tell me this, Nick? Is it my fault he's got a job? Wouldn't be surprised if those cut-throats paid him well just to remind them you can't be successful and keep a heart. He is a trusting old party, isn't he? Daresay he wouldn't brush his own hat for fear of offending the fairies."

But Nicolas saw Beau Ashmead's failure to place Eleanor Grantley in a snug harbour rankled; and for all his hard shrewdness the old man would feel it necessary to continue Grantley's pension—money thrown away.

Janet came in. By way of farewell her grandfather rattled:

"Don't see how any woman who gets a man to the point can have the slightest respect for him. Know when she hooked you, Nick? Wish I wasn't too old, hang it, to have the ladies cast their pretty flies for me."

Nicolas since the announcement hadn't had many opportunities to yield to his impulse to take Janet in his arms and forget in her responsiveness the less congenial side of his situation. He

didn't doubt her love, nor did she give him reason to; she merely hoarded its expression, limiting his opportunities to be alone with her, perhaps wishing her few yieldings to carry a headier thrill. Whatever her motive, its expression made it simpler for both to forget the strain of their fresh alliance.

He had merely glided over his disapproval of the leak, and, on her part, she had been as surprised as he, had indicated that her grandfather hadn't been let in, and had repeated his mother's unsatisfactory resignation; yet decidedly she hadn't been displeased.

"I don't care how many people know of my happiness, for I am happy, Nick. What's done's done."

That vibrant phrasing of what had been so much in his own brain held the finality of a knell.

Everyone, moreover, had agreed. Even his mother had permitted the newspapers to know about the family dinner party, and it was during that dull function that he realized how thoroughly his feet had been constricted; for Mr. Ashmead treated him with a pompous familiarity, insinuating a too hurried paternal interest, while the powdered old fellow in the frame over the mantelpiece seemed mildly amused.

Janet's attitude during the evening was calculated to impress the older Aldriches as thoroughly as her fiancé. It possessed a very careful deference, a demure simplicity, yet the minutes loitered.

In the drawing-room he was stimulated to a livelier interest by a word to his mother from Mrs. Ashmead. A favourite retreat of Beau Ashmead's among remote New England hills would be opened for the Christmas holidays.

"Dickie Goodhue's on the list," Janet said to him. "Jack Berry, Driggs Wandel. If you're interested in the ladies——"

But Nicolas had caught Mrs. Ashmead's droning voice again.

"I thought it would be so nice to show Mary Morley's girl what an American Christmas is."

"Will the Morleys go?" Mr. Aldrich asked.

"By all means," Mr. Ashmead declared with the voice of a judge pronouncing sentence.

"It's really for us," Janet was whispering in Nicolas's ear.

But he knew it was nothing of the sort. Their affair was taken care of. It was to spur Hal to his task, to furnish him an occasion he couldn't very well evade; and if Lady Mary had agreed to take her daughter it was to deliver her unreservedly into the Ashmeads' hands.

He disliked to think of Mary's portion, although she might propel Hal back to the fold before he could hurt outsiders. A day or two later, however, he was unpleasantly reminded of the young man's continued strayings. He saw the statuesque Clarice emerge from a shop with the Bamber girl in tow. There was no eluding them. Sadie Bamber's shrill voice brought him up. In such a neighbourhood the less of that the better.

"Cla—rice! It's Mr. Aldrich!"

Clarice became a statue. She stirred to life sufficiently to say:

"How do, Mr. Aldrich. Haven't seen you since the night Hal brought that picture girl to the Pantheon. Where do you keep yourself? Hal says you're a hermit."

"All these rich fellas are," the Bamber girl giggled, "'cause they have so many rocks to live on."

"I hope, Yvonne," Nicolas smiled, "you borrowed that from the show."

"Don't string me, Mr. Aldrich. I got a line in the show now."

"Congratulations. Next year I hope you'll have two."

"Thanks," the cherubic face grinned. "At that rate, if I live to be a hundred, I'll grab a real good part."

But they had read the papers, too; and their real design was to congratulate him. Clarice did it with a word and became marble again, but the Bamber girl stared up the Avenue as if she saw the dwelling-places of celestial beings.

"Must be like marrying one of those beautiful ladies in the art museum."

Their felicitations painted another sordid shade across his memory.

"That's the end of you," the Bamber girl was mourning.

Clarice quickened.

"Don't talk like a fool, Sadie. A wedding isn't a funeral. Men don't go to Woodlawn when they get married."

"Then join our lodge, Mr. Aldrich," the girl plead. "Give you a night off now and then."

He made his escape, hoping the encounter hadn't been observed, but Driggs Wandel laughed at his elbow.

"How the fair cluster about Apollo!"

Nicolas grimaced.

"Since any one had to catch me I'm glad it's you, Driggs. It rather ruffles that Clarice would scarcely have jumped at Hal on the Avenue."

"Why should she?" Wandel drawled. "The better one knows people the more thoughtful one should be."

"Why don't they keep on their own side of town?" Nicolas grumbled.

"Why don't we?" Wandel asked lazily. "Sally, Ethel, Janet go to the Pantheon. Clarice, Sadie, God knows who, return the visit. Saint Antoine throngs to the—shall we call it the Place de la Revolution?"

"Of course not. Don't be absurd."

"Don't take me too literally, Nick; but what fishwives they make to knit and gloat in front of a scaffold overcrowded by our dearest ideals, each trussed up, pitifully waiting its turn to die; and I hope my figure takes no body, for once or twice recently the cry of the terrorists has threatened my own precious ears."

Nicolas glanced at Wandel. The little man was quite serious, yet he seldom employed generalities save as a means to a concrete point.

"In a filthy old taxi on my way to the Long Island station the other day," he drawled on. "Game of golf with Dicky. Held up by the traffic at Forty-second Street, when along slides a truck with a man perched on top—a foreign-looking chap with an unreasoning head made for a red cap. Did you ever observe, Nicolas, that a liberty cap constricts a man's skull more than any other form of head-dress? No matter. You were stopping in here?"

Nicolas nodded, and followed Wandel into the club toward

which he had been walking when Clarice and Sadie had stopped him. Since it was after six o'clock the lounge was well sprinkled. Hal slouched in a corner with Jack Berry, a slender, good-looking youth who always impressed Nicolas as a perfect example of the enervating results of living tranquilly on other people's restless effort. Nicolas just then rather envied a brain that was too sluggish to answer the summons of indecision and alarm. Berry nodded. He must have spoken to his neighbour whose back was to the newcomers, and Hal's shoulders confessed acute consciousness, but he neglected to turn. With a twinkling, comprehending smile Wandel conducted Nicolas to a brace of chairs facing a broad avenue window.

"I was saying," he drawled when he was seated, "chap on a truck. I in a foundered taxi with a bag of disreputable golf clubs. Chap staring at me."

"If you don't mind, Driggs," Nicolas said, "cut all that and deliver yourself of what you mean."

Wandel mimicked surprise.

"My dear genius, don't you see that's what I'm at? Because this chap stared with a genuine hatred that wanted to see me swinging. He shouted with the voice of an impatient executioner: 'Hay, you're going to play golf, ain't you? Hay, you know where you're going to get your supper, don't you?' And, as if the offence to himself passed reason, he bawled the stunning news to the driver. I wanted to point out he knew jolly well where he was going to find his own meal, for I've an idea what those truckmen get, and it's quite as much as they earn. What use? He hated and wanted to destroy me, to all appearance a salaried man off for a precious holiday, because my golf clubs symbolized something he hadn't got his fingers on; yet with equal awkwardness golf is played by artisan and aristocrat. I had long regarded it as an incitement to rage; never to revolution. He actually began to demand that I share my mediocre wealth with him. Give you my word, I breathed when the traffic broke and I got on. Surely you catch my meaning?"

Nicolas flushed, recalling his fears the night he had forced John to leave Eleanor Grantley's boarding house.

"In a general way," he muttered, "I know the spirit's about. The silly enthusiasms of the war gave it a boost, and the general fight to grab since has helped it. But why do you obscure your real point?"

"I merely aim to make it clear," Wandel smiled.

He tapped with his cane on the window sill.

"Gad, what a mob! If Jack Berry could use his brains as well as his eyes, he'd run for his life. Look at 'em, Nick. See the painted women! If you don't know the faces can you guess the quality? That one! Is she a respectable wife and mother, or a bit of scarlet colour to make the town bright? That chap in well-cut checks! Is he a merchant, or a successful hold-up man? And there you have rags—men out of work after the fat years. Look at 'em, slinking along—all sorts pouring to this street, and most of them white angry because it's so deucedly clean, pleasant, and out of their normal ken."

"Not a tenth are real Americans," Nicolas said.

Wandel ceased his tapping.

"You astonish me, Nicolas! It is we who are not the real Americans. The real Americans are of foreign birth or parentage, and those only qualify by doing one of two things—experimenting with social dynamite, or sacrificing this mighty land mercilessly to the advancement of whatever intrigues happen for the moment to occupy the country of their origin."

Languidly he lifted his cane.

"But I had in my mind particularly those men in livery, who drive automobiles for a mighty pittance. How would you like to have a monkey-wrench come hurtling through this window? I was amazed night before last to learn such a thought isn't far-fetched. I gathered that our Harold's John is one of the very realest of Americans."

Nicolas frowned. If John had become promiscuous in airing his wrongs there was, indeed, more than a chance of scandal.

"I was afraid it was what you were driving at, Driggs."

Wandel's face grew serious.

"Then my experience wasn't unique? You, too, have been admitted to his confidence?"

Nicolas nodded.

"One night when I went over to try to persuade that Grantley girl to pose for me."

Wandel pursed his lips.

"He'd found his way there? Unfortunate."

"Yes. I fancy I was of use in convincing him of that."

Amusement flashed in Wandel's eyes.

"My dear Nicolas! You never dreamed you could lure that girl to your studio?"

"Why shouldn't she come? What do you think she wants, Driggs?"

"Who," Wandel asked, "can tell what any woman wants? At least this one doesn't care to be an artist's model or a chauffeur's wife."

Nicolas stirred impatiently. Wandel's voice dropped to a murmur.

"I'll admit John's familiarity shocked me, for it outlined a cataclysmic overturning of all the social facts we have been taught to depend on. I fancied the proletariat in our homes. I saw our wealthy sweating in the factories. I even dreamed of the greatest upset of all, Nicolas! I actually pictured educated, well-bred, reasoning men in the seats of government."

"No mind for satire," Nicolas said impatiently, "no matter what truth's in it."

Wandel's dark eyes snapped.

"Very well. Let's have facts. Why shouldn't John confide his amorous troubles to us since our Harold places himself in rivalry with his servant?"

"Drop it, Driggs!"

"As a future warrior of the tribe," Wandel proposed easily, "it's to your benefit to face facts."

"And that's what you've been at," Nicolas cried—"warning me? At least there's no question of rivalry. The man means nothing to her."

Wandel spoke gently.

"He's honest."

"He's reposterous," Nicolas muttered. "He's mad."

"Merely venture to suggest," Wandel drawled, "that madmen are frequently risky."

"Hal must get rid of him," Nicolas decided. "No use speaking to Mr. Ashmead. He'd laugh at the idea of his precious son's compromising himself in such a quarter. The old man is sharper, because he's that much coarser. Let us talk to Hal, Driggs."

"I'm not so sure," Wandel mused, "that John isn't safer within the fold than on the outside. Here's a chance, anyway. Hal beats on our tack."

Nicolas glanced over his shoulder. Hal lounged up grinning cheerfully. Had he refused to notice them at first in order to seek and make perfect his off-hand manner? He sat on the window sill, glancing from one to the other.

"You look as if you'd been talking of something unpleasant."

"What penetration!" Wandel yawned. "We were speaking of you."

"Fortunate I couldn't hear," Hal said.

"Perhaps," Wandel offered, "more fortunate if you could have. But why?"

Hal laughed cheerfully.

"Because you apparently think there's little good to be said."

"Not I," Wandel corrected him. "Rather your dashing chauffeur from whom you rescued the lady of the garage."

Nicolas looked for an outburst then; at least a diminution of Hal's buoyant mood. Instead the handsome face expanded in an artless smile.

"Has he been blowing off to you, Driggs?"

"Night before last," Wandel answered, "when you were thoughtful enough to let him drive me home. But I really can't make a practice of sharing the troubles of my friend's retainers."

Hal, still grinning, turned inquiringly to Nicolas. Nicolas nodded.

"When?" Hal asked. "I can't think just when he would have had the opportunity to bore you."

"One night, some time ago," Nicolas answered, trying to veil his discomfort, wondering that he should have it to do.

"Where?" Hal persisted.

"At the boarding house where Miss Grantley lives."

Hal's studied mirth was replaced by an interest, unaffected, nearly suspicious.

"What the deuce were you doing there? What was he?"

"I," Nicolas answered, "went over to ask her to give me a chance to paint her."

Hal whistled.

"Pose, you mean. Would she?"

"What do you think?"

Hal's eyes wavered, no longer met Nicolas's, studied the floor; his hand moved jerkily.

"Heaven knows what that girl would do or wouldn't do."

"At least that was one thing she wouldn't," Nicolas said.

"Your man had found his way there."

"Daresay," Hal muttered. "Needn't bother, either of you, to tell me what he said. Most tiresome. He's talked quite a lot, according to Halloran. Too bad he didn't try it on Father. Might have vanished before."

"The crown prince," Wandel jeered, "can do no wrong."

"You mean he's gone now?" Nicolas asked, recalling John's threats. Then the man must have shied at the last from blackmail.

Hal nodded, his cheery ease of manner recaptured.

"I pointed out the gate last night."

"You don't mean to say," Wandel asked, "he took it without a word of protest, a few gems of wisdom?"

"He went," Hal said, "like a lamb as an alternative to roaring in the direction of the police station. Too bad! He had only one fault: fancied everybody was stalking the lady who'd probably forgotten him. Queer what twisted ideas men get."

"One doesn't dream that's why you turned him out," Wandel hinted.

Hal started.

"Hadn't I said? Fact is, last evening he tried to match me

against an elevated pillar. Frightfully heavy odds. Just in time I jumped the contract. The results are John's fired and the runabout's gone to the jeweller's."

Nicolas saw even Wandel was startled. If John had had the courage for such an attempt the situation held a threat more serious than scandal, and Hal's unconcern was its gravest danger. He had always had a tendency, a normal enough inheritance, to overestimate his own moral and physical strength. Nicolas tried to point it out to him, but Hal unconcernedly swept away the subject. He stood up, apparently more cheerful than ever.

"I've liquid treasure stored in secret," he confided. "Let's slip below and drown a surreptitious snifter."

Wandel accepted gaily.

"Let's all break the law, since it's our newest, most popular fashion. Let's encourage, and drink to, our best American, John."

Nicolas was among the last to join the Ashmead party. He had been delayed by his attempt to overthrow his mother's curiously stubborn determination not to accompany him.

"Your father and I would rather have our Christmas quietly at home," was the most he could get.

That was the unpalatable side, for he would have preferred spending the holiday with them; but, because of this new cramping of his feet, he had to submit himself to an unwilling scrutiny of Hal's surrender; for he had no doubt his future brother-in-law, removed from contiguity with shabby restraints, would accept the legitimate glory his parents had marked down for him.

The long journey through the ashen, sullen day little by little cleansed his mood as the freshly fallen snow thinly obliterated the mud about New York, then thickened into vast, white, tempestuous surges that stormed across the northern landscape. Janet was at the station alone in a cutter drawn by a spirited horse.

"What's the use," she said as she pressed his hand, "having your very own man if you must share him perpetually?"

Nicolas drew the sharp air in his lungs; with a heady excitement settled himself close to Janet in the warm nest of furs; took up the reins; but her very means of granting him a privilege furthered her miserly and enticing strategy of making herself more precious. The snow was deep enough and the horse sufficiently spirited to take all his attention. Once, indeed, outside the village in a lonely stretch of road, he did turn his head and her lips touched his in a fleeting caress.

"It's good to have you at last, Nick."

But she looked away, and, for the moment, offered him nothing more.

"Who's here?" he asked anxiously.

She babbled the list of names.

"Your father?"

"Naturally. Came last night with the Wardens and Helen Glendon."

He was pleased she didn't mention a secretary; but, of course, there had never been any risk of it; Christmas was a day to be interfered with only through compelling emergencies.

She smiled.

"And my revered grandparent, paying his court to Lady Mary like a youth with his first devotion."

"When did Hal land?" Nicolas asked.

Occupied as he was, he didn't miss the flash of temper in her eyes, the uneasy twitching at the corners of her mouth.

"This morning, and you'd say he'd like to take the first train back. I give Hal up. Gloomy as a bear, with occasional lapses into cheerfulness that suggest the sideboard."

He tried to brush aside the old regret for her naked discernment, but she wouldn't let him, rambling on quarrelsomely:

"I'm afraid he's been rather too much on the loose this winter. He needs tightening up. You'll lend a hand, dear man?"

She was as bad as Beau Ashmead. Why should they turn to him? He wasn't yet one of the family.

"Come, Nick! Yes?"

"I admit nothing," he answered, "but I don't have to say, Janet, I'd be of service to you in any way I could."

She rewarded him with another fleeting, laughing touch of her mouth; but he felt as though the cords had been drawn tighter. He couldn't dismiss her hints as he had Beau Ashmead's. He had committed himself to interfere in a situation he wanted with all his heart to keep clear of, which, indeed, involved his self-respect, his own pride of family. He caught just one comfort. Hal's restlessness might be a symptom of his removal from Eleanor Grantley's fleeting light.

As the narrow road climbed among the trees his vision of an artist awakened to a series of engrossing compositions. The velvet darkness of pines and hemlocks burst through pallid draperies on the slopes. Against the snow, birches, silvery and slender, had the surprised airiness of spectres abruptly denuded of their invisibility. The loneliness, the cleanliness, the unreal colour, drove from his mind the puzzles Europe had given it. Momentarily that became the land of a nightmare whose haggard details fade with the first dawn; the only congenial setting for such figures as Wandel's truckman, John, Eleanor Grantley. He thought he had swept them all away, then found that he hadn't, for his old urge to make a model of that girl enclosed her in his brain; rearranged the background he had conceived for her; placed her image quite distinctly over there, hands outstretched appealingly for an unguessable gift, figure as graceful and elusive as the spectral birches amongst which she strayed, her hair against the ashen slope a patch of sombre flame.

At Janet's voice she vanished.

"What are you thinking of, dear?"

He had been realizing it was fortunate that during the next few days the flesh and blood of such a vision wouldn't glide between Hal and the Honourable Mary Morley.

"I was thinking how lovely it is, Janet, and how odd I've never seen it before. That's the house?"

She drew a trifle away for the public benefit.

Although he had never visited Hill's End he knew its history. More than a generation ago Beau Ashmead's honest good-nature and money had permitted him to scale heights from which he craved, and could afford to make, an occasional flight. He had,

consequently, bought these lonely acres and a colonial farmhouse, which, with his gift for having things done well, he had turned over to the best rural architect of the period. Outlined as it was now against a flushed sky, Nicolas couldn't tell where the original structure ended and its many additions commenced. On its eminence it possessed more significance than a dwelling; it was like a fanciful cairn raised to mark the exact centre of a scarcely limitable circle, which enclosed, as in a bowl, tumbling white and green hills, veiled and mystical valleys.

For the first time he was glad he had come, and at last Eleanor Grantley slipped from his mind.

He accepted it as a commentary on his own kind that the guests should have gathered about the great fireplace in the hall, removed from any possibility of a glimpse of that breathless prospect.

While a man took Janet's and his wraps he glanced quickly at the welcoming faces. Sally Warden and a girl of the same fresh vintage, Helen Glendon, whom he scarcely knew, played bridge in an insufficient light with Wandel and Jack Berry. About a tea table, drawn just beyond the most ardent mood of the fire, were grouped Mrs. Ashmead, Mrs. Warden, Mrs. Goodhue, and Lady Mary. The Honourable Mary sat a little aside, regarding the fire listlessly, as if she hadn't shared the conversation of the older women. Nicolas's instinct was to go straight to her, take her hand, and advise:

"For the Lord's sake, Mary, chuck it. Pack up and run. It isn't worth the worry."

He hastened through greetings with the object, at least, of joining his cousin.

"You and Janet cut in," Wandel offered, evidently bored. Sally Warden's insinuations jarred.

"Where have you been, Janet? It isn't ten miles to the station. We'd thought Nick and you had eloped."

The youthful Berry simpered.

"At some games, Sally, the faster you work the slower you go."

"If I might venture to point it out," Wandel hinted gently, "bridge is one of the most important of these."

Nicolas wandered on, leaving Janet to bear the brunt of misplaced humour. Where was Hal? Where was Mr. Ashmead?

While he yielded himself to the welcome of the three women about the tea table he had a sharpened and uneasy regret for his mother's absence. When Mrs. Ashmead spoke of it Lady Mary glanced away, but Mrs. Goodhue complained openly:

"I don't see why she didn't join us, Nick."

He glided through the only possible reply—not well; wanted to remain with his father, who hadn't been able quite to manage it. Meantime, he was aware of a strain of attention from his cousin who seemed waiting for him to complete the prescribed motions. When he was free she took his hand and drew him to the chair at her side.

"So glad you've arrived, Nick. Sit here while Mother brews you a cup of tea."

The blonde prettiness of her face seemed a trifle worn, its adolescence faded as through a recent, unwanted absorption of mature apprehensions; and her mother, he had an idea, as her careful hands flew among the tea things, was conscious of the change and restively vigilant for its issue. Mary, then, must know why she had been brought, must feel herself a valued parcel anxiously delivered by hand. Nicolas's viewpoint shifted. For her sake, if for no other reason, Hal must be made to accept such a gift. That was really what Janet had meant him to take a hand in, and he would, because the Honourable Mary Morley couldn't decently chuck it now. She had an air of clinging to him as the only man in the hall she could feel at ease with, yet she scarcely spoke, merely nodding or shaking her head in response to his formal questions, until he asked bluntly:

"Where is Hal?"

Her tired face quickened with a momentary fright, but when she answered her voice was apathetic.

"Dicky and he strolled down to the pond with old Mr. Ashmead, I've an idea to test the ice. At luncheon Mr. Ashmead said men were removing the snow, and I fancy there's to be skating to-night. Do you care much for skating, Nick?"

"I don't mind anything," he answered, still watching her, "that keeps one moving about out of doors."

Was the skating designed to deliver Hal and Mary to the impulsive obscurity of a winter's night? Glancing at Mrs. Ashmead, he was inclined to draw from every detail of the entertainment a ruse of a campaigner who leaves nothing to fortune; but this stratagem, Mary let him see, possessed a flaw: she didn't care for skating.

"Had little enough chance to learn at home—I mean in England."

"Mary," he said softly, "you wish you were at home. Please don't be homesick with us."

Her eyes half closed, as if to veil their pain.

"What nonsense you're talking, Nick! America's my home."

The bridge game, probably at Wandel's instigation, had broken up, and the players had gathered about the tea table. Jack Berry must have caught Mary's last words for he cried out in his vapid fashion:

"Why do girls leave home?"

Sally's answer was propelled by the familiar Warden giggle.

"Maybe to find out why men do."

"I'll tell you," Wandel said in his slurred voice. "To discover it can't be done. It's the curse of our civilization that one must hop from home to home or become hopelessly lost in the wilds."

Fresh colour came into Mary's face, but Nicolas realized that Wandel was incapable of having had her in mind, that his precept had been prompted by another woman, who, without a home, already wandered about the borders of the forest. It impressed him as peculiarly unjust that Mary Morley should know nothing of her, would be incapable of understanding if she did; had never seen her, probably never would. He glanced up curiously.

The shadows had gathered. The only light in the hall came from the fire whose leaping flames reflected themselves in the panels of a door opposite. That door, Nicolas realized, opened

slowly. Mr. Ashmead's portly figure appeared against the background of another fire flanked by rows of books. He closed the door and paraded across.

"I heard your train whistle, Nick. Bad journey?"

Nicolas shook his head mechanically. He heard Mary's surprised voice.

"What is it, Nick?"

His whole shocked attention was centred on that door which had opened again immediately, disclosing Eleanor Grantley's slender grace, caught in an anxious blaze of light between the two fires, as though each endeavoured to impress him with her fateful importance in this house.

He wanted to turn to his host, accusing him of criminal short-sightedness; but Mrs. Ashmead, he saw, had no thought, either, of the danger; and, even had they known, the smug social confidence of those two wouldn't have been disturbed by Hal's fleeting, profligate fancy.

There was no question. Eleanor Grantley's large eyes had stared for a moment straight at him without a flutter of recognition. The girl knew her place right enough; almost too well, he decided. She closed the door, walked with silent ease along the hall, and climbed the stairs; the helpless, unhurried prey of an inescapable fatality.

It was significant that the women's chatter didn't falter while the men remained speechless during the moment before she disappeared. Jack Berry burst out then:

"I say, Mr. Ashmead, who's the Botticelli lady? How did she jump her frame?"

"Best girl our office has caught in a dog's age."

"Too bad you had to interfere with the poor thing's holiday," his wife murmured.

Mr. Ashmead spread his hands, speaking with his judicial manner.

"The courts are no respecters of comforts. If people choose to plunge into difficulties, lawyers have to help them out."

"I'd heard," Jack Berry said; "the Twickham crowd. Makes you sit up."

"Necessary wreckage of a period of readjustment," Mr. Ashmead wandered on.

Nicolas lost the thread. He gathered that Wandel was trying to hide his own surprise behind a jibe at Jack Berry.

"Art course," Berry apologized uneasily. "Only took it on because nobody'd ever flunked it except one chap who didn't bother to turn his paper in. Surprising how much sticks. But that kind of picture always appealed to me. Most of the others too stout. Excuse me——"

The actuality of Nicolas's vision did wander then, graceful, seeking, flushed, through the Ashmead house; seemed to glide threateningly in front of Mary Morley. No wonder Hal punctuated his moodiness with trips to the sideboard. How could Nicolas help? Could Hal be brought to his senses save through the sacrifice of that fate-pursued girl?

Hal, when Nicolas saw him later, appeared abundantly aware of her presence. On his return from the pond he had gone directly to a glass-enclosed verandah in which a fire burned. He sat there, a servant within call, while he drank and stared at the night as it concealed the white hills beneath its purple cloak.

"Have a drink," he urged his friends. "Cheer you for being dragged to such a deadly show."

Dicky Goodhue studied him with an air of bewilderment.

"Most pleasant party," Wandel yawned.

"Cocktails, Mason!" Hal called to the servant impatiently. "Tanks of them. Got to change in a jiffy."

This humour was more disturbing than his forced cheeriness the other day at the club. He was like a wanderer suffering on the bank of a stream without the strength to stoop and appease his thirst. Nicolas didn't care to study such impotence. He swallowed his cocktail and started for his room. On the stairs he found Driggs Wandel at his heels, but without saying anything hurried on. Wandel, however, stepped in after, closing the door. Nicolas had a nervous impulse to drive him out.

"I won't have any more warnings."

"Why should you?" Wandel asked. "They would be superfluous."

He strolled to the window, and for a time stared at the cramping dusk.

"Your bath is probably drawn," Nicolas reminded him.

Wandel didn't turn. His voice rang with an unusual earnestness.

"I might point out that Hal and I have been fond friends these many years."

Nicolas strode to him and touched his shoulder.

"Of course, Driggs. I'm sorry. I'd give much if his father hadn't dragged that girl here."

Wandel nodded.

"Do you question, as I do, whether your friendship would survive his mutilation of a charming picture? Have you ever observed, Nicolas, that excessive consumption of alcohol deadens one's inhibitions, enlivens one's less worthy impulses?"

Nicolas turned away.

"How should I?" he asked impatiently. "I'm not a drunkard."

Wandel yawned.

"How eccentric these dry days!"

He tapped with his finger on the frosted pane.

"I'd feel much easier," he mused, "if his indulgence made our Harold more cheerful. The moon to-night will be a bad loser to the snow clouds."

He turned, smiling.

"As a graduate in the school of love, my dear Nick, perhaps you can tell me if the ice on a dark evening gives particular desirability to the girl at hand."

Nicolas recalled his own estimate of Mrs. Ashmead's tactics. He nodded. Wandel knew as well as the Ashmeads what was afoot.

"The ice will probably see it through," he answered frankly.

"And," Wandel reminded him, "pictures that work for their living can't very well skate."

He went to the door, turning there and stretching his arms over his head.

"Too bad sharp country weather makes one sleepy. See you in the gallery on the ice, my Nick."

While he dressed, Nicolas marvelled that Hal should avoid the fact that his actions, if not for identical reasons, were the chief concern of the entire house. Downstairs, however, the protagonist yielded no concession to his importance. He descended among the last, his eyes too bright, his manner over-gracious. From that very alteration, Nicolas drew encouragement. At last his indulgence was making Hal more cheerful, consequently more pliable; but Nicolas found it difficult to meet Mary Morley's eyes.

As he gazed at the laughing faces and the brilliantly gowned women who lifted glasses from Mason's tray; as their chatter, mingled with masculine tones, crowded his ears, he responded to a reluctant sympathy for the stenographer, more striking than any of them, who in some lonely room upstairs, over a solitary meal, endured the hollow echoes of their merriment. Rather more painful than a view of abundance from her garage window! He wished her back there, for in spite of everything, she had set sail and had drifted perilously close to the breakers that guarded the glittering land of her desire.

Mary Morley had the appearance of a wanderer, too, but of one wearily uninterested in her destination. At dinner, next Hal, and opposite Nicolas, she sipped her wine, nodded, and let escape the necessary words of a disingenuous attention. Hal's dutiful chatter, from what Nicolas caught of it, was feverishly centred on wholly impersonal subjects—airy plans for a Southern cruise in February, the probable selections for the polo team, a new comic opera of which good reports had strayed even this far; and Janet, he realized, without his knowledge, was as watchful and puzzled as he. Nicolas glanced up. Beau Ashmead, at the head of the table, had reminded them of their submerged housemate. He cackled an inquiry to Mrs. Ashmead who assured him the girl was well looked after. Nicolas caught Hal's momentary silence, the effort with which he escaped it.

Beau Ashmead's indiscretion, moreover, didn't halt there.

He seemed driven by sullen memories of his own sunk youth. When Nicolas, toward eleven o'clock, came down ready for the pond, he found the old man waiting with Mr. and Mrs. Ashmead by the hall fire. At the warnings of a general descent Beau Ashmead faced his son aggressively.

"Where's that gel of yours, Alfred?"

"I hope catching up with what I gave her this afternoon."

"Were you ever young, Alfred?"

Mr. Ashmead's laugh was indulgent.

"You ought to know."

Beau Ashmead shook his head.

"Seems to me, as I look back, you were older than I am when you were born. That gel's young. You're doing your best to make her forget it."

"If you were younger yourself," Mrs. Ashmead smiled, "one would suspect——"

"Complimented if you did," the old man snapped, "but I never expect flattery from my children. Go on and have your fun. I'll rout her out and take her down to the ice for a breath of fresh air."

Nicolas's sympathy was conquered by an alarm which vanished at once. He thought he had seen enough of Eleanor Grantley to know she couldn't possibly be forced to accept such an invitation. She wouldn't go; but the grandfather's kindness might make her a trifle less discontented.

"It wouldn't do," Mrs. Ashmead was saying.

"Why not?"

"It would only make her uncomfortable."

Her husband agreed. Beau Ashmead's infused eyes narrowed.

"Seems I brought my children up a great deal better than I did myself," he grumbled. "I'm a failure. Admit it, 'cause I've never got over the darn-fool notion that a person can be human without money and the queer notions that go with it."

Mrs. Ashmead raised her eyebrows.

"You might spare Nick."

"Nonsense," Beau Ashmead rattled. "Nick's neither blind nor deaf. He told me so the other day. Go on to the pond. I'll air this high-grade animal of yours, Alfred."

The stairs filled with bundled skaters. Beau Ashmead wandered off, calling for Mason. Nicolas shared Mrs. Ashmead's resigned amusement for the patriarch's favourite pose, which his senility had caused to flower into a social inconsistency. Since in this instance it couldn't reasonably cause complications, Nicolas left the house for the pond with one concern—the outcome of the evening for Mary.

Hand in hand Janet and he floundered through the snow to the brink of the hollow behind Hill's End. There, in a blaze of illumination, their clasp was broken. Vigorous tongues from the bonfire which had been lighted on the ice snapped their greed across the hollow; and filled it, as the wind caught and scattered them, with saffron, changing flashes. Nicolas saw that the lower end of the pond sulked in an inky blackness. The setting was so congenial Mrs. Ashmead might have seen even to that significant detail.

Ahead, through the grotesque, irresolute shadows, the party streaked noisily down the slope. Lady Mary, her daughter, and Hal wandered just ahead. Hal drew a sled, piled with rugs, and made comfortable through an improvised back-rest. No trouble was spared for that tired, apprehensive girl. Janet evidently shared his premonition of a climax, for she spoke with nervous impatience.

"I wish Mary would try to skate."

Nicolas shared her misgivings. The desirability of the girl at hand must at all costs be impressed upon Hal to-night. Janet's haste hinted an anxiety to be at that task; yet there was little enough either of them could do. She sat on a log that sprawled in the snow at the brink of the pond, urging him to hurry with the fastening of her skating shoes.

He saw Hal place Mary Morley on the sled, tuck rugs about her, then stand awkwardly, the end of the rope dangling from his fingers. His pose suggested a final resistance. Then he was off, skating gracefully, swinging the sled in widening circles,

but always in the vicinity of the bonfire. The younger people glided here and there. Lady Mary, Mrs. Goodhue, Mrs. Warden, and Mrs. Ashmead, from chairs placed near the warmth, watched placidly. The sled came scraping by the log. As he straightened, Nicolas heard his cousin say:

"But you really oughtn't to fret about me. I'm quite content, you know, to look on."

Janet made an uncontrollable gesture of disapproval. Hal's receding laugh was a polite protest.

Nicolas drew Janet to her feet and, hand in hand, they curved about the edge of the pond, called greetings to other pairs, paused at last near the log, as if summoned by a dry crunching in the snow of the slope. Janet's hand tightened in Nicolas's. As he followed her glance, all his notions of Eleanor Grantley tumbled about his ears, for the girl came down the hill, side by side with Beau Ashmead, Mason at her heels. Janet's voice was sharp.

"What does she mean?"

Nicolas covered his surprise.

"Your grandfather said something about seeing she got some air."

"But why should she come here?" Janet cried. "What's she thinking of?"

The girl must know what she was doing in this instance. Certainly she hadn't placed herself in such a graceless position without a motive. Nicolas felt baffled. He tried to tell himself she was no longer worth worrying about since she appeared to seek unhappiness, the inevitable and fatal crash among the breakers. He looked around uneasily. There was Hal flashing the sled about beyond the bonfire. When he turned back Eleanor Grantley stood poised on the edge of the pond, without effort drawing the surprised glances of everyone on the ice, even the admiration of the indolent watchers in the chairs. It suggested a studied exhibition, yet Nicolas guessed it might very well be nothing of the sort; rather an unconscious and not unnatural embarrassment as to what to do next. The others, still glancing, went on with their occupations. Janet and

Nicolas continued to look, and perhaps Hal, over there, chained by his duty, was wide-eyed, too.

By Jove, her pose was unstudied; any attitude to be so arresting must possess complete unconcern for its details. A long cloak with fur at the neck covered her in graceful folds—a garment probably snatched up by Beau Ashmead and flung, against her wish, across her shoulders. A fur cap rested on her ruddy hair, which seemed to give the key to the whole preposterous picture; for the blaze from the pond outlined her in flame, even lent to her long, attenuated shadow on the snow a warming tinge of crimson.

“Go over and see what it’s all about,” Janet shot at Nicolas.

He had a quick suspicion, brushed aside as unjustifiable, that Janet wished to destroy the impertinent girl’s sudden and outlandish predominance of the pond.

By the time he had glided up Eleanor Grantley was seated on the log with Beau Ashmead at her side, and Mason fumbling about her feet.

“Hello, Nick!” the old man greeted him. “Take a hand here. Run back to the house, Mason. You’re only of use about ice when it’s cracked. Got to save this young lady a headache. When they work you to death, Miss Grantley, you complain to me.”

Nicolas, as he stooped and worked over the ill-fitting skates they had found for her, hoped she would explain her inconsistent yielding; but she said nothing, and from her eyes he drew only a vague worry, perhaps that he should misconstrue her motive. How could he misconstrue an intention he knew nothing about? Hal’s wonder of the other afternoon rushed back to him, more perplexing than then. “Heaven knows what that girl would do or wouldn’t do.”

“Not a perfect fit, but I think they’ll hang on, Miss Grantley.”

He looked about for Janet. Dicky Goodhue had got her and involved her in the intricacies of a stupendous figure.

“Give Miss Grantley a turn,” Beau Ashmead said, as if he were asking a casual favour. “I’ll relieve you when I’ve tried my wings.”

Nicolas smiled. The old man had got a pair of skates on his own boots.

"Nothing to laugh about, Nick. I'll show my own son I'm a long shot younger than he is. When I can't take my chances on the ice with the ladies I'll be ready for a nurse."

With a pronounced hesitation Nicolas nodded and offered his hand to Eleanor Grantley. She sprang up without seeing it, and glided easily with him across the smooth surface, but she avoided the vicinity of the bonfire. He didn't hide his admiration.

"Where did you learn to skate?"

"A place you may never have heard of," she answered defiantly. "The lake in Central Park."

"Everyone ought to explore it," he complimented her.

He found it increasingly difficult to speak; he was too conscious of the scrutiny of the other skaters, of the group in the chairs. His mind, moreover, had room for only one topic: the true cause of her descent on this party whose laughter was a stinging reminder of her isolation. He would have to make a fresh estimate, yet, he felt with a sharp irritation, it was beyond him to reach any valid appraisal whatever. He managed a few banalities about the ice, the setting, her work, to which she didn't trouble to reply; and he was glad when Beau Ashmead jerked up, pointing out a general gathering about the fire for warmth. She offered no resistance when the old man led her over. Nicolas, with a nod, made his escape.

The sled rested in front of the chairs. Hal bent over its occupant with comforting anxiety.

"You've been most awfully kind," Mary said, "but I'm really quite chilled."

"Then stay awhile by the fire," Lady Mary directed.

Mrs. Ashmead didn't appear to care for her son's liberation. Hal, indeed, glided off rather too spiritedly. Then Nicolas was drawn away by Sally Warden, who talked faster than she skated, and for a time teased him about Mr. Ashmead's stenographer while she let surprise and disapproval slip.

Jack Berry claimed Sally before long and left Nicolas free.

Before going back to Janet he stood apart, glancing about for Eleanor Grantley and Beau Ashmead—such abundant youth hampered by the brave but futile effort of old age to remain youthful! He started. Beau Ashmead stood by the chairs, leaning over Lady Mary, his sense of social justice smothered by the ashes of an old desire.

There was Janet, still with Dicky Goodhue; but where were the fur cap and the contrasting glow of hair that made Eleanor Grantley so easy to identify? Wandel glided up.

"You're remote and thoughtful, Nick."

"What the deuce did she come down here for?" Nicolas asked.

"Miserable failure at riddles," Wandel said absent-mindedly, his eyes, too, searching the pond.

"I'd have risked all I possess," Nicolas hurried on, "Beau Ashmead couldn't have dragged her here to-night."

"And I," Wandel agreed, "would have frowned upon you for laying on a sure thing."

"Has she gone to the house?" Nicolas asked. "I don't see her."

"Has Hal gone to the house?" Wandel echoed in his driest manner. "I don't see him."

They faced the lower end of the pond where the reflections of the flames wavered to a complete extinction.

"You admitted," Wandel breathed, "that the ice on a dark evening gives a particular desirability to the girl at hand——"

Janet's plea, his unwilling promise, rushed back to Nicolas.

"Come," he said. "Let's find the precious idiot."

They started for the dark end of the pond. In the borderland between the night and the false day of the bonfire they were brought up sharply.

"Isn't the first time she's done that," Wandel snapped. "Let's hope it's not for the same reason."

Nicolas's ears rang with the sharp feminine cry, quickly smothered, that had pierced the darkness ahead; and his memory reviewed Eleanor Grantley's few handclasps, went back to the night Hal had told of her wonder that men should always want to touch one.

"It's slightly cold," Wandel sneered, "for the inspiring ice to have broken through."

Nicolas started ahead, his heart beating too fast.

"It's the Grantley girl, right enough," he called roughly.

"Let's get to her, Driggs. Quick!"

VII

HAZARDOUS COUNTRY

AS THEY raced down the pond Nicolas listened breathlessly for a repetition of Eleanor Grantley's cry, and, when it failed to come, dared hope her original appeal hadn't reached the skaters near the fire.

Hal had evidently taken pains to avoid an interruption, for the first confused murmur of voices slipped from the very extremity of the ice. Nicolas glided over and made out two figures almost lost in the night. Hal challenged anxiously.

"Who's that?"

"Knights errant," Wandel drawled, "to the rescue of damsels in distress."

Nicolas tried to cover Wandel's innuendo.

"Heard a lady cry out. What damage?"

The feminine figure obliterated itself as far as possible against the high bank, but he thought one arm was raised across the face; and Hal, when he spoke again, confessed an appreciable strain woven with temper.

"Oh, yes. Nothing. Had no idea any one was so close."

"Nicolas and I were patrolling," Wandel said dryly. "Sort of volunteer life-saving service. Had an idea someone might have gone through."

"Don't be an ass," Hal answered unsteadily. "You know perfectly well the pond's frozen to the bottom."

"Then——?" Wandel hinted. "It's painful to abandon the idea of being useful."

"Fact is—you see——"

Hal floundered helplessly. The woman against the bank stirred to his rescue, and Nicolas saw her hand had, in fact, been

raised. Her musical intonation held a tremor and she fumbled for words.

"I—I'm sorry. I turned my ankle. It—it hurt so I cried out. If you don't mind, Mr. Aldrich——"

She lifted her hand again, and Nicolas, nearly unbelieving, felt it rest lightly on his shoulder. Of course she was at her old trick, turning to him to rescue her from dilemmas of her own asking, but this time he found himself adamant. By coming to the pond, most of all by exploring with Hal this black arbour, she had placed herself definitely beyond his compliance. He was certain, moreover, from her lack of pressure, that she wasn't really hurt; but the light hand continued to quiver against his shoulder.

"I—I will be all right in a minute."

"One of you take the other side," Nicolas directed. "We'll get her back to the house."

"No!" Hal cried.

"It isn't necessary," she supported him with quick dismay.

"In just a minute——"

Her hand left Nicolas's shoulder. He stooped impulsively and grasped it.

"Then come," he commanded. "It's worth a try."

Before the others could protest he hurried her toward the distant twinkling of the fire, while her first resistance diminished, while she glided beside him, her grace and swiftness confessing her masquerade. When through his glove he felt her fingers struggling to disengage themselves he tightened his grasp. For a moment she was a bad child to be led as swiftly as possible to safe banishment. Doubtless she would go willingly enough, since she must have had plenty of opportunity to accomplish whatever had urged her to the pond.

"My hand!" she plead.

But he continued to lead her toward the fire, and it wasn't until they stood within its faint radiance that he scraped to a halt and released her fingers. Why had he stopped her? There was nothing at all he could properly say, yet he heard his own voice speaking roughly.

"Why did you go out there?"

She did, indeed, resemble a child fearful of discipline.

"I don't know, Mr. Aldrich. I didn't want to. Yes, I did."

"No matter," he said, trying to control his censorious impulse.

She spoke quickly, with more emotion than he had ever heard her express.

"It does matter, and I don't want you to think I went against my will."

She asked for it, and the thought of Mary Morley over there, forgotten by Hal, urged him to give her plain speaking.

"Tell me why?"

"Perhaps," she answered, "I thought I'd be happier away from the rest."

His shrug must have reminded her she had known the only possible result of Beau Ashmead's distorted kindness.

"I—I'm sorry about my ankle," she temporized.

"Miss Grantley!"

Her voice quickened.

"That's right. Scold me, Mr. Aldrich. I need it."

He was in too bad a temper to let her impose upon him to-night.

"I scold you! What are you talking about? I can't help observing you skate quite easily."

She lifted her gloved hands to her face, and he thought her shoulders shook. He moved close to her, anxious, contrite.

"Please forgive me, Miss Grantley, if I was wrong. It's none of my affair——"

He reached out. She shrank from him.

"Don't touch me," she said. "It's none of your affair."

He grasped her wrists and tried to draw her hands away. The ringing of skates announced the approach of Hal and Wandel.

"Please, before they see."

Her resistance dwindled and she let him pull her hands down. He released them. There wasn't sufficient light to read her face.

Hal and Wandel scraped up without saying anything. Intuitively they had all assumed the manner of conspirators who seek to screen a secret which is safer not spoken of even in camera. As if driven by such sinister knowledge they separated, skated back to the group around the bonfire, and, without advertisement, became a portion of it. Before going to Janet, Nicolas looked at Eleanor Grantley in the light to verify his suspicion that her breakdown had been calculated. With a startled disappointment he realized that he had been unfair, for her face showed the traces of tears which, as he looked, she stealthily attempted to remove.

Janet greeted him curiously.

"Where have you been?"

"Taking a flier with Driggs to the end of the pond."

"Seen Hal?"

He indicated the bonfire.

Hal had, with the gesture of one who expiates, picked up the rope of the Honourable Mary Morley's sled.

"Wondered if he had gone back to the house," Janet said. "He's so undependable these days."

He caught her meaning and so measured her relief; but he wasn't prepared for the gracious form it took.

"Why not take a flier with me, dear, to the end of the pond?"

He nodded, glancing at the lookers-on who had left their chairs. Beau Ashmead, with sliding steps, helped Lady Mary across the ice. The old man saw Eleanor Grantley standing apart, irresolute, and appeared to seek suitable shoulders for the burden he could no longer conveniently carry. Hal had drawn the sled near by and watched impatiently. Then Driggs Wandel glided between, offering himself.

"Going up, Miss Grantley?"

She nodded, and he hurried her to the log. With an abrupt gesture Hal started the sled. Mary Morley called out:

"I should like to go back, too."

"Hurry," Janet whispered. "We haven't long."

Hal overcame the protests of his charge and started on a long tangent. His action, to an extent, reassured Nicolas. The

ice might win the struggle, after all; had, it was conceivable, over there in the shadows, seen the worst of it through already.

"How odd of Driggs!" Janet said as they glided away from the fire.

"Odd?"

But he knew what she meant.

"Why," she went on, "do you imagine Miss Grantley let Grandpa drag her down?"

"I suppose he's right," Nicolas offered. "One must have a breath of air."

Janet nodded.

"I suppose so."

She seemed to forget the secretary. As they receded from the fire she skated closer to Nicolas, interlocked her hands with his. From the first he divined she had it in her mind to reward his patience, to offer him one of her rare material proofs of affection, and with a rush of dismay he discovered he didn't want it; shrank, indeed, from accepting her submission. Contentedly, since she couldn't guess its cause, she shared his silence while she guided him to the end of the pond, and, through an unhappy chance, halted at the obscure place beneath the high bank where he had found Hal with Eleanor Grantley. He wanted to urge her anywhere else, but she offered her lips, and he touched them with an effort of the will, a sensation of accomplishing a formal, a distasteful ritual! He was glad when she freed herself, laughing excitedly, and started back for the light. As he skated swiftly beside her he condemned his susceptibility, and promised himself with cold resolution that the cloud formed by Hal's folly shouldn't for long lower its deformed shadow over the smiling and delectable regions of sentiment.

A glimpse of Eleanor Grantley in the hall the next morning reminded him she had had her share in the gathering of that dark vapour, and the worst of it was she appeared not to be conscious of her fault. What armour did she wear to spare herself the scars of such an experience? Her very serenity added to his concern. As a means of self-defense he spoke, for she was going

on to the library without acknowledging his presence almost at her elbow.

"You start early, Miss Grantley."

She paused and looked at him without answering.

"I'm glad your ankle permits you."

Her lips parted.

"It was nothing, Mr. Aldrich, but it taught me I'm too awkward to skate. I shan't try it again."

Secrets between them! Probably without meaning to, she always reminded him they existed.

Again she had an air of dismissal, slipping into the library and closing the door. He was glad, nevertheless, she should do that, for it confessed a scar of a sort, even hinted she might have taken whatever had happened last night as a saving warning. It was Hal who carried the more visible marks. Perhaps, though, he had kept Mason occupied until quite late; for his cheeks were sallow, his eyes lifeless, his gestures abrupt and frequently without aim. After sullenly swallowing a cup of coffee he wandered from the house, muttering something about the stables.

It was sufficiently evident, to the family at any rate, that the ice had failed to shape its expected inspiration. Janet was anxious and distrait. Mrs. Ashmead had the helpless air of a general who sees his favourite tactics lose their virtue. The Honourable Mary failed to descend before luncheon; and she appeared then, if anything, more tired and apprehensive than yesterday. Eleanor Grantley couldn't reasonably be blamed for that. Within the British girl's vision she would be less apparent than her maid. Even if Mary suspected, which was unlikely, the clandestine moment at the dark end of the pond, her training would give it the value of a whim, not very pretty, to be sure, but fleeting, of no genuine substance.

But she refused to offer the ice another chance, pleading a headache, expressing a blunt preference for solitude; and Beau Ashmead was indifferent or wiser, for when most of the party descended again to the pond during the afternoon he said nothing of airing high-grade animals.

Nicolas's uneasiness about his cousin finally urged him up the hill.

"I want a word with Mary," he explained to Janet. "I've scarcely seen her."

"You're thoughtful, Nick," she approved.

He followed her puzzled glance to Hal who, in temporarily livelier spirits, made himself universally agreeable. Why the deuce didn't Hal break Mary's solitude? Why didn't he permit her to bask in the warmth of his cheerfulness?

Nicolas glanced in at the library. Mary was there, as he had expected, in a window overlooking the pond, listlessly holding a book in her hand. She wasn't, in fact, alone, although she might as well have been, for Eleanor Grantley sat before her typewriter in another window at the opposite end of the long room. Her location expressed an effort to remove herself as far as possible from the joyous antics of the pond. As Nicolas crossed the room she didn't glance up, nor did the clicking of the keys under her long fingers falter. In spite of last night he failed to smother a quick sympathy, for there was more than the skaters to point out her loneliness. The fact that the Honourable Mary Morley had entered the room at all should have hurt. That indifferent figure of another woman so close, yet actually much further removed than the fortunate skaters in the hollow, must be a constant reminder to Eleanor Grantley of her drab place; a merciless index to the true meaning of whatever had happened last night in the shadows of the pond.

Mary received him gratefully.

"I saw you leave and start up the hill. Why, Nick?"

"Perhaps I wanted to learn how long headaches last."

"Until a thoughtful cousin arrives."

She yawned frankly, wearily.

"I'm tired, Nick. I want to cry, I'm so bored."

He sat beside her in the window. Because of the size of the room and the rattling of the keys, only a little reserve was necessary to shut the busy stenographer from their confidences.

"You disapprove so of the Ashmeads and their parties?"

Her eyes widened.

"I disapprove of any one, of anything! How could you dream me so presumptuous?"

"Why are you bitter, Mary? I daresay some of us aren't altogether like the people you've played with."

"That's rotten comfort," she said lazily. "People of our sort don't vary much the world over. Reminds me, though. I've met very few war profiteers in America. Perhaps your profiteers don't go about as much as ours. If America had a peerage it would be so much simpler to keep track of them."

He shook his head.

"Stop it, Mary. It isn't like you."

"What isn't, Nick? That I shouldn't have my very own profiteer? I suppose if Papa hadn't died, I would have had."

She stared at the pond that was the hard colour of steel under a threatening sky. Lackadaisically she ran her hand back and forth across a window pane, so that the diamond of one of her rings left ragged lines.

"A Victorian habit!" she sneered. "If I were a generation earlier I'd make a heart enclosing two sets of initials."

"Whose, Mary?"

"The Ashmead heir apparent's and Mary Morley's."

"Mary! Do you really care for Hal?"

He didn't know what reply he wanted. He wasn't prepared for the one she gave.

"What has that to do with it? Can't you guess it's the fact you all know why I'm here that gives me a headache?"

He leant closer and spoke seriously.

"You must understand that it has a lot to do with it. Do you really care for him?"

She stirred restlessly and made an ugly mark on the glass. He saw that her eyes followed Hal as he caught one after another of the skaters and whirled them, laughing, away. With a flying start now he leaped over the remains of last night's bonfire and glided smoothly across the pond, arms outstretched, a figure of strength, of ease, of supreme confidence. He was admirable when he behaved himself, and it wasn't difficult to believe Mary had learned to care for him.

Almost reluctantly Nicolas glanced at the graceful figure across the room. Wasn't it rather easier to understand how her striking head had been turned?

Mary, when she spoke again, suggested it wasn't affection for Hal that troubled her.

"That's the fault with me," she complained, her despondency more pronounced. "I should have been Victorian, or I should have come into the world a little later. At home and here women have been emancipated just out of season for me, Nicolas! It makes me feel less than human, a—a trifle unclean."

"It ought not to," he objected.

"You say that because men are too occupied to find out what's happened to women. It's got in our blood. We know the ladder out of the pit is there, only all of us can't find it in the dark."

"You're morbid, Mary," he protested. "That revolution was never designed to startle women like you."

"You're wholly wrong, Nick, just because all women are women."

And she let him see her patrician brain after all hadn't been neglectful of Eleanor Grantley's humble presence.

"Don't you suppose that typist over there has it in her blood? Perhaps without knowing it she, too, is fumbling for the bottom rung."

Nicolas started, wondering as he glanced again at the ruddy head against the opposite window, how far his cousin's idea might answer the interrogations that elusive girl invariably posed.

"Isn't she pretty, Nick, in her queer way?" Mary wandered on. "You should make a picture of her. Curious how much beauty springs from ugly soil."

"At least," he smiled, "the revolution hasn't overturned any social barriers."

She shook her head.

"You really mustn't judge by me. I'm only one of the many presented with a victory we don't know how to use."

"Then perhaps," he said dryly, "you'll be good enough to tell me why you came here at all."

She ceased her scratching. The steel of the lake was un-

disturbed. At the log the skaters beneath drifting snow-flakes prepared to climb the hill.

"That's the very reason," she smiled. "All her life Mother's been fond of old Mr. Ashmead, and he is a dear. Why shouldn't she like the Ashmeads? Why shouldn't I?"

She laughed.

"Perhaps they don't pose as gilded deities quite so gracefully as you or I, but that's because when one's fairly fresh to sitting on an altar one burns too many candles to attract the worshippers. What a caddish thought! Forgive me, Nick."

There was nothing to forgive. Mary's fling at the Ashmeads caused not the least resentment, but it had aroused Nicolas's curiosity that the younger generation of such families as his own had never examined closely the foundation of newer houses; and he flushed with an uncomfortable appreciation. His mother, because she was that much older, would take a good deal less for granted.

That, he reflected, was the growing social impulse, to let sufficiently daring assailants into the citadel. Beau Ashmead had been among the first to storm it, but could he have planted his flag on the ramparts without the roaring siege guns of great wealth? The ruddy head across the room seemed to cry out to him how ghastly wrong such specialized surrender was, that the only virtuous capitulation would be an impartial flinging open of the gates.

Mary's anxiety recalled him.

"I am sorry, Nick. But it's so different with you and Janet. You're sincere doves while I—how do you say?—I'm supposed to bring home the bacon."

He winced. From a wordly point of view, wasn't he at the same task?

"I was only thinking, Mary. Then your mother has said——"

"No. Mother wouldn't, but I can't help feeling the tide. I've drifted ever since I've been in America. I've told you I was born too soon or too late. I was born for a drifter."

Her eyes half closed.

"I wonder where I'll be cast up."

Her doubt lessened Nicolas's chagrin, since it told him she hadn't made up her mind, that her mood was determined by her own rather than Hal's hesitation. He arose. The party from the pond streaked up the hill. Two farm hands had joined it, bearing an axe, a saw, a coil of rope.

"Come on, Mary. It's no good asking for headaches in a stuffy house."

"Where should I go? Aren't they coming back? What are those men for?"

"It's our host's idea to scout for the Christmas tree, to hand pick it in its native state; and he's specially asked for everyone, old and young, to take a hand. The walk won't harm you."

Languidly she let him draw her to her feet. Her voice was resigned.

"You're like a physician, Nick. I'll manage your prescription."

As if her palate shrank from the dose, however, she paused near the busy girl at the typewriter.

"How pleasant it must be to have a definite task!"

The clicking ceased.

"How very quickly you work!"

The ruddy head lifted. Nicolas sought then in the oval face for resentment, anger, jealousy; and saw nothing at all. Eleanor Grantley gave the Honourable Mary Morley a meaningless smile and turned back to her work.

While Nicolas waited in the hall the rear door opened and Hal stormed in. For all his flushed face and sparkling eyes he resembled a reluctant messenger. Nicolas made no secret of his guess that Janet or her mother had despatched him.

"Mary'll be along. She's after her wraps."

Hal nodded, and moved about restlessly. After a moment he stood quite still, listening. The Honourable Mary had neglected to close the library door, so that through it reached them distinctly the rattle of typewriter keys. Hal relaxed and walked toward the sun parlour.

"Little bracer, Nick?"

Nicolas shook his head, but he followed and watched while Hal drank thirstily. Hal glanced back at the house, frowning.

"Lonely old hole when it's empty, isn't it?" he grunted.

"Most houses are," Nicolas said. "Mary ought to be ready."

She appeared just then in the doorway and for the first time saw Hal.

"You came for me?"

He bowed.

"Thought if your headache was better——"

"It is," she smiled.

"Then we'd better catch the others," Nicolas prompted.

He was sorry he couldn't gracefully go off by himself, leaving the two to another opportunity; for Mary's discontent had made him more eager than before that Hal should at least give her the chance to drift to a convenient rest or else lift herself from the smothering flood of custom.

As they passed beneath the library windows he glanced up, but the ruddy head still bent above the machine, and the prisoner didn't waste one glance of envy on their freedom.

They caught the others who ploughed through the unbroken snow of a hillside toward a grove of trees. The fresh flakes scattering down rested lightly on the burdened branches of evergreens.

Janet waved her hand, and Nicolas hurried over, satisfied he had done all she could have asked.

"I suggested to Hal," she said, "I didn't know——"

"Mary, you mean? She was coming along. What's the route?"

"My grandparent's the guide," she answered carelessly.

"Rather stupid. I'd much prefer some tea."

"There's always tea," he said.

"And Christmas comes but once a year," she mocked.

The route led through the grove, an untrimmed thicket whose offshoots forced each member of the party to seek an individual passage. They were some time, consequently, blundering through to a reunion in an abandoned field strewn with young

trees. Laughing protests shot up. One's boots were full of snow. One's clothing was torn. Beau Ashmead ran stiffly here and there, pointing out trees, calling for a vote. Attention centred on a symmetrical spruce. As he walked over with the rest Nicolas felt Janet's touch on his sleeve, and turned to meet her troubled gaze.

"What's the matter with Hal?" she asked.

"What is, Janet?"

"Don't tell me," she said impatiently, "he's lost himself in the woods."

He glanced about the field. She was right. Her brother had disappeared. He recalled Hal's start at the clicking of the keys, his nervous thirst in the sun parlour, his comment on the loneliness of the house. Hill's End couldn't be called empty for him so long as Eleanor Grantley sat in the library.

"Like a good man," Janet said nervously, "fetch him back. Find out what's wrong. Give him a talking to."

"I'll find him," Nicolas agreed, "but the rest's not so simple."

He looked at her closely.

"What do you think's wrong with him, Janet?"

All her broad perception shone in her angry eyes.

"How should I know about such things? There must be something, somebody hidden in town. It's plain enough he's miserable with us."

As he started quietly away Nicolas didn't blame Janet for misinterpreting Hal's restlessness. She didn't know what had happened last night. She couldn't imagine him in such a temper with the cause of his disquiet at his side.

He tore a path through the woods, resenting his mission, since he hadn't the slightest doubt where it would lead him. From the terrace he glanced anxiously at the library windows. The ruddy head wasn't there. Apparently Hal alone had the power to attract Eleanor Grantley from her work. Hurriedly Nicolas entered the hall. The library door remained open, and at once he caught the sound of impetuous and earnest tones that evidently didn't let through the calculated stamping of his feet as he took off his coat, or his embarrassed, "Hello, within!"

* Out of the confusion Eleanor Grantley's voice came cold and sharp, like steel.

"Are all men hateful? I won't be trapped this way."

And Hal's reply, out of key with all Nicolas had ever known of him:

"There's the bell. Ring. You'd look well with a pack of servants howling in, for there's no one else. We'll get on reasonable ground while we've the chance. No woman's ever made a sniveling ass of me."

"Leave me alone, Mr. Ashmead. What do you want?"

"You're not blind. You know what, but I mean to find out what the devil you want—and give it you, within reason."

Nicolas was running along the hall, breathing hard, experiencing an active enmity against Janet for having placed him in such a predicament.

"Hello! Hello!" he called. "Paging Mr. Ashmead, Junior!" He paused at Hal's startled response.

"What ho! Fire? Assassination? I'm in the library."

Nicolas entered, absorbing details without expressing the slightest curiosity, projecting a bored indifference, a naïve ignorance. He could guess to what extent his shout had altered the tableau. Hal stood awkwardly in front of the fireplace, flushed and ill-tempered; his hands behind his back, probably to hide their nervousness. But at a few paces, on the rug, close to the arm of a deep chair, a half-consumed cigarette burned unheeded, filling Nicolas's nostrils with the odour of charred wood. The others seemed not to notice it.

Eleanor Grantley was erect by the chair, as if she might recently have sprung up to defend herself with her merciless question. More than ever Nicolas valued her self-control; for she had an appearance of indifference, her white face letting nothing slip; her only concession the sudden life of her eyes, whose form, however, she managed to guard. Yet she must have appreciated Nicolas's amazement at finding her, work neglected, sharing the dusk with her employer's son. She must have guessed he had heard at least Hal's threatening tone. Hal, himself, was sufficiently worried about that.

"What you doing here, Nick? Why shout for me?"

"They thought you'd got lost," Nicolas answered, smiling. "You're the Christmas child, aren't you? So I was to find you and hurry you back to the festivities."

Hal started unevenly for the door.

"Dashed nuisance! Grandad's in his dotage."

It impressed Nicolas as conformable with her unusual poise that it was Eleanor Grantley who stepped around the chair and placed her foot on the burning cigarette. Hal at the door looked back at her. He spoke as though he had until that moment forgotten a detail of vital importance.

"Fact is, I had some letters to get off, and thought I might steal a bit of Miss Grantley's time."

He went out with the air of not caring to observe the result of his ruse.

"I had no time for him," Eleanor Grantley murmured.

"Then," Nicolas said, "I shan't detain you."

He watched her walk slowly to her typewriter, sit down, and arrange her papers. Almost at once her long fingers were busy among the keys. From their swift rhythm she might have returned to her task after a formal and unimportant interruption. Leaning against the chair on whose arm Hal had sat, Nicolas studied her with an increased but perplexed admiration. Once she glanced up, and seemed surprised to find him still there.

"Do I distract you?" he asked.

The clicking ceased. She smiled wanly.

"Not in the least. The house was so lonely——"

He realized, as the irritating noise recommenced, that she had expressed much more than she had actually said; had, for instance, deliberately thanked him; more than that, had begged him to remain as a protection against a recurrence of such loneliness. In his present temper, indeed, Hal might double back at sight of Nicolas leaving the house. In any case, the party should be on its way home. Nicolas remained on guard, therefore, if one cared to think of it as that.

He strolled to the window next the one in which Eleanor

worked. There she was invisible, but the sounds of her labour continued to reach him, eloquent of her incomprehensible self-possession. More than once he nearly yielded to the impulse to turn back with frank questions, with undisguised warnings; but too much of habit and accident separated them. He stared instead from the window, but he could approximate the feelings of one who, without the energy to throw a rope, watches a man struggling futilely in deep water.

He wished the others would come. There beyond the woods, soon, the van appeared, tugging a long cord. In a moment they were all in sight, the young tree tumbling crazily after them down the slope, leaving great scars in the snow, as if it fought against its sudden and amazing violation.

Hal must have gone straight back, for he walked close to Mary Morley, a little apart from the others, as one again at the dreary task of expiation.

Nicolas's glance followed the advance until the shouts of those at the rope became audible to him through the glass. He turned then and left the window. The girl at the machine must have heard, too, but her fingers didn't hesitate; she failed to glance up.

Nicolas wanted her to see that picture, desired it to sink in her mind as a warning he could decently give her. Even to her eyes Hal and Mary walking apart must etch the gray, inevitable future. He paused close to her.

"See, Miss Grantley. They are bringing the tree. They are nearly at the house."

She looked once, then turned back quickly, and her fingers for a time were helpless. He was sorry he had done it; it was too much like adding to the grief of a bad hurt. Unexpectedly she spoke, and for once her pain vanquished her suppression.

"I want to go away, Mr. Aldrich."

He longed to urge her from Hill's End.

"There's some chance of your finishing?" he asked.

She nodded, quite in command of herself again. Where would she go? To the boarding house?

"So I must get on," she said easily, and her fingers resumed their precise, exacting labour.

Nicolas went out, met the others, and had a share in crowding the tree to its appointed place in the drawing-room, but from his mind the spirit of Christmas had vanished.

It was late. People had begun to dribble to their rooms. Mr. Ashmead lingered, exercising a measured garrulousness which little by little hurried the guests upstairs.

"Don't you imagine, Nick, the Twickhams are the only ones who'll smash. The Federal Reserve system has kept a lot out of the fire, and will save some more; but there won't be anything like stability at a normal level until a dollar approaches the value of a dollar."

Hal drifted in from the sun parlour and listened for a moment.

"Must be time to dress," he muttered defensively.

His father glanced at his watch.

"No idea it was so late. We'll need to hurry. Oh, Miss Grantley, I was waiting for you. I heard bells just now."

Eleanor Grantley, wearing a hat and cloak, and followed by Mason, who carried her bag, descended the stairs. Vaguely Nicolas recalled a recent jingle of sleighbells, and a glimpse of Mason going up; but Hal seemed to have had no warning, and his feverish eyes suggested resistance as he stared for a moment agape, then walked unevenly to the foot of the stairs.

"What's this? You're not off, Miss Grantley?"

Mr. Ashmead spared her an answer.

"She's been very quick. The Twickham thing's in shape for Marvin to digest with his turkey. You've earned your holiday, Miss Grantley. Hope you enjoy it. Train ought to land you in good time in the morning."

"Thanks, Mr. Ashmead."

She went by Hal as if he had not been there, and approached the door which Mason had opened. Hal stared vacantly, but before she had got through, he pulled himself together.

"Just a minute!"

She turned and waited without interest.

"Who's taking her down?"

Mr. Ashmead shrugged his shoulders.

"Why shouldn't I?" Hal asked; "if Miss Grantley doesn't mind."

He faced her with a laugh.

"Daresay you've no preference for drivers. Stuffy! Brisk dashabout in the snow just my tonic."

Surely her helplessness would let fear or anger through. Her placidity wasn't marred, and all she answered was:

"I've very little time."

Nothing disturbed Mr. Ashmead beyond a doubt that Hal could get back for dinner.

"Lightning at driving and changing," Hal laughed. "What say to a hat and coat, Mason?"

The movement of Eleanor Grantley's head was doubtless a farewell. She walked out, and Nicolas, when he reached the door, saw her entering the sleigh.

"Good-bye, Miss Grantley!" he called.

He hadn't the heart to offer her a Merry Christmas. Her voice no more than reached him.

"Good-night, Mr. Aldrich."

Hal hurried anxiously by, and settled himself beside her. The stable man let go the bridle. There was a flash of colour from her hair in the radiance of a window, then the night closed uncompromisingly about the pair. Was she eager for that dark companionship with Hal, or terrified by her inability to avoid it? As he strained his eyes futilely Nicolas suffered again the shame of a man without the energy to throw a rope. Mr. Ashmead's pompous voice recalled him.

"You'll catch cold there, Nick. It's an abominable draught. Besides, we ought to go up. Hal will be late."

No one seemed particularly disturbed by Hal's tardiness. When, during the early courses of dinner, Lady Mary offered a word of interest Janet alone troubled to answer.

"Arriving toward the close of the second act is one of our Harold's specialties."

Nicolas's concern kept pace with the lengthening minutes.

When finally Hal entered he was a good deal later than his errand should have made him. His staccato apologies meant nothing, nor did his manner during the remainder of the meal suggest whether or not the lonely ride had been to his taste. He chatted with Mary Morley, and with Mrs. Goodhue on his other side, rather too freely and with a slight confusion of manner; and afterward he shared without visible pleasure the decoration of the tree and the Ashmead's distribution of rewards to their guests. At the first opportunity he disappeared altogether.

Wandel disapproved.

"He mustn't sulk in his tent to-night," he said to Nicolas. "Will you join me in a small crusade?"

Nicolas followed him upstairs to Hal's room. In response to a knock Hal's voice came to them faintly. They found him stretched on a *chaise longue* at the foot of his bed, a tin of cigarettes and a laden ash tray on a table at his side. Only one globe over the dressing table fought against the choking smoke.

"Trying to anticipate your immortal future?" Wandel wanted to know.

Hal spoke gruffly.

"Why the deuce don't you leave me alone?"

"Perhaps," Wandel hinted, "many downstairs are asking themselves why you leave them alone."

"Small importance."

"One's duty," Nicolas said pointedly.

Hal could read as much meaning in it as he chose. As a matter of fact, he sat up abruptly. He seemed a trifle dizzy as he bent forward, his hands dangling between his knees, the corners of his mouth drooping.

"Oh, yes. Thanks for reminding me."

And after a moment:

"One's duty!"

He got to his feet and lurched toward the dressing table. Wandel went to him.

"What's up, Hal? You're not well?"

"Right as can be," he answered, arranging his hair and straightening his tie. "Half asleep."

He faced them, offering his hand with a grotesque smile.

"Lead me, thoughtful comrades."

Nicolas, as they went down, didn't trace Hal's eccentricities wholly to Mason's exercise of his specialty. The happenings of last night and to-day were more reasonably responsible. He lost sight of him almost at once, since the older guests were drifting apart while the younger dispersed in intimate groupings. Jack Berry and Sally Warden had giggled a course to the library. Driggs Wandel sacrificed himself to Ethel's amusement. Dicky Goodhue, who had no idea how to shirk a social task, chatted with Mary and Helen Glendon in a corner of the hall. With a smile Janet claimed her own and led Nicolas to the sun parlour. He wasn't sorry to find a predecessor, but it was only Hal who stared at nothing while he drummed with his fingers on the glass. At their approach he went back to the house, muttering:

"Excuse me. How sweet are the paths of duty!"

"What does he mean?" Janet asked.

Nicolas knew, but he didn't care to inform Janet. Her curiosity, for that matter, was brief. In an arbour one's own emotions are alone important. She settled herself in an easy chair, drew another close, and motioned him to sit down. When he had obeyed she gave him her hand.

As he pressed the warm fingers mechanically his mind became crowded with a dull wrath against Hal; against Eleanor Grantley; against Janet, because she had involved him in their indiscretion; most of all against the shadow with which they had darkened the land of sentiment; for, instead of dissipating, he feared now the cloud had grown until it could only wear itself out through tempest. The worst of it was, he couldn't let Janet guess. When she placed her head on his shoulder, with an automatic movement he drew her close.

A dim light, sifted through the hangings of the neighbouring room, was pallidly reflected from the snow-piled panes. He listened to the flakes, whispering a perpetually repeated enticement in a tongue he dared no longer understand, for at last he acknowledged his mother might be right. He realized that,

when in the conservatory he had taken Janet in his arms, had touched her lips, had involved his future with hers, he had obeyed the identical blind impulse that had lashed Hal to his madness of the pond and the library.

"If no one else stumbles about!" Janet sighed.

It was so unfair to her. He must overcome his sense of unworthiness. From this moment he must try to make it up to Janet. That was a duty he could dodge with infinitely less justice than Hal could shirk his. Evidently her brother lingered in her mind, for she spoke softly.

"Mary is so quiet. I wish she were happy, too. When I'm with you, Nick, I want everyone to be happy."

How unfair that would be for Mary! He moved away.

"Hello!" he whispered. "People do stumble about."

The hangings had parted.

"Who joins us?" Janet asked.

The Honourable Mary Morley stepped through, followed by Hal.

"Hang it, Mary! The place is crowded."

Nicolas shrank from Hal's studiously hearty tone, from his pointed familiarity. It was the first time he had used Mary's Christian name, and since he had known Janet and Nicolas were in the sun parlour, he must have brought her here with a purpose.

Mary laughed harshly.

"It's Nick, isn't it?"

"Come over, Mary."

His cousin walked rigidly toward him. As he stood up he was aware of Janet's suspense. Mary stopped.

"We came out, Nick, to listen to the snow; it says such cold things."

"Mary?"

Quickly she moved her head.

"Yes. I've stopped fumbling about in the dark."

She glanced back, stressing the name.

"Isn't it so, Hal?"

With all his mind Nicolas wanted to demand of Hal what

had happened in the sleigh; desired to know if he had spoken to Mary of that, or of last night.

"You say queer things, Mary; but I daresay you're telling Nick I'm the luckiest man in the world."

With a little cry Janet sprang to her feet.

"Mary! You're going to be my sister!"

"Rather looks it," the Honourable Mary Morley said under her breath.

"I'm so glad, my dear! I'm so glad!"

Impetuously Janet clasped the British girl in her arms, held her close, and touched her cheek. In the pallid night Nicolas read in his cousin's face only shock, as if Janet, instead of a kiss, had, without warning, given her a blow.

When Nicolas, directly after the New Year, read the announcement of the Ashmead-Morley engagement the impassive image of Eleanor Grantley glided into his mind. Poor devil of a girl, perhaps at this moment bent over a dejected breakfast table, facing those headlines! How her eyes must blur! How her heart must falter! How she must lust to cry aloud against the rotten injustice of it! Poor typist, fumbling for the bottom rung merely to find herself flung deeper in the pit of vanished hopes! For after his talk with Mary Morley Nicolas had no doubt Hal had turned the girl's head, that her expectancy had depended solely on him.

"What is it, Nicolas?" his mother said. "Surely you knew?"

"At Hill's End. Yes."

He waited for her to express an opinion, but she lifted her coffee cup, gazed from the window, and said nothing. His father, on the other hand, expanded with satisfaction that now the Ashmead money had all been turned into graceful channels.

"Old Beau Ashmead," he smiled, "has reason to be proud."

"Then it's safe to say he isn't," Nicolas offered.

But immediately his mind swung back to the boarding house. Those inscrutable eyes, he was willing to hazard, would let something of the truth through while they scanned the cheerless

prospect of years of office drudgery. Yet she had alternatives. Clarice was one. Perhaps the thought of her beauty profitably exposed to the multitude wouldn't be untenable to Eleanor Grantley now. She might prefer it to her choice of a return to her mendicant father and sharp-voiced mother. How much had she to regret or to blame herself for? That night of her departure from Hill's End in the sleigh she must have made her blunder or reached a fatal decision.

Mr. Ashmead had been asking Nicolas for some time to visit the office, since he sought to interest himself more usefully in his future son-in-law's affairs, so Nicolas chose that morning to obey, and learned at once that Eleanor Grantley had made no sudden, angered move. When he entered Mr. Ashmead's room she sat at the side of the desk with her pencil and notebook. He couldn't avoid a swift glance at the oval face which hitherto had let him see so little, yet he shrank from reading her mental anguish. He looked away, having caught no more than her old delightful, mystical impassivity. As he talked to Mr. Ashmead he told himself she had failed to see the announcement or else, decidedly, since her acting was incomparable, her place was on the stage.

Mr. Ashmead was on the point of dismissing her, but Nicolas shook his head.

"I'll only be a moment. Poverty has no secrets."

Mr. Ashmead didn't care for the word, rambling about the proper guidance again, too eager to blaze the way. Nicolas, with his preference for the straight trail of self-esteem, excused himself as soon as he decently could.

"She doesn't know," he mused.

But Mr. Ashmead halted him. He had lifted a newspaper from his desk, pointing to the headlines.

"You've seen this, Nick?"

"First thing," Nicolas answered and closed the door.

Then she had known. All along it must have stared at her from the desk, and she had probably first seen it, as he had fancied, over her breakfast in the basement of the boarding house.

"Game!" he thought. "She'll stick it out. In the same office!"

Was it fair such vast distances should separate women—two women like Mary Morley and Eleanor Grantley? After what he had just seen, that girl must possess breeding of a sort. Her eyes should have been red. She should have surrendered herself to rage.

"What cheer, brother and cousin!"

Hal faced him from the door of his office, recording most of the emotions Eleanor Grantley ought to have displayed, attempting without success to veil them with a pleased and airy manner.

"So the news is out?" Nicolas said. "Feet feeling all gummed up?"

Hal's grin was forced.

"Admit I was an ass ever to have talked such drivel. On the contrary, most delectable sensation. Feet made for carpet slippers. Always hankered after potted rubber plants."

"Feet in carpet slippers!" Nicolas said pleasantly. "Sounds like no more nocturnal wanderings. Odds the chorus is in tears. How about the comely office force, the pretty typists?"

Hal frowned.

"I know dashed well which one you mean."

"One from over the fence whom we've talked about before," Nicolas agreed.

Instead of expressing a plain enough anger Hal burst into a laugh.

"Have your cousinly rights, only for the Lord's sake let's get 'em over with. Must say your family hangs together. Mary hasn't a papa, so Mary's cousins do the job. Dicky was at it a little earlier, but with a more open hand. Gad! Felt a Bluebeard. See here, Nick, if I've been a bit cross at times, it was because you wanted to make a mountain out of a molehill."

Nicolas desired to repeat what he had heard from the library at Hill's End. Of course he couldn't, and Hal hurried on anyway.

"Time for you to realize one can swear off all sorts of things."

He placed a hand on each of Nicolas's shoulders, and clung with a grip that hurt—the grip of a man who needs another's strength.

"Get it straight, Nick. Wild oats reaped without damage! I'm an elderly gentleman now, a hanged sight happier than I deserve to be, bless Mary! Never speak of it again."

Eleanor Grantley left Mr. Ashmead's room, came along the hall, passed them, and disappeared. At sight of her beauty Hal's face didn't alter.

"Never speak of it again," he repeated softly.

It occurred to Nicolas it would be impossible ever to talk of it again, and he believed it wouldn't be necessary. Eleanor Grantley could remain with Ashmead and Warden and learn it was no good, for Hal had, indeed, sworn off. Her fantastic dream held no more illusion of reality. It was done.

VIII

DISASTER

WHEN he was in his studio Nicolas's relief admitted doubts. Those who reform are subject to relapses, and Eleanor Grantley's presence at Ashmead and Warden's would be a perpetual enticement. Her bewildering unconcern might be assumed from that knowledge, from a stubborn faith in her resources, from a refusal to concede her vision dissipated. He flushed at the possibility of the Honourable Mary Morley's having been given her choice because of something a stenographer had said in the sleigh between Hill's End and the station, yet the more he brooded over it during the days that followed, the more it appeared logical that she had.

At this period, happily, fresh labour occupied him. Janet's portrait, on its journey to the Fifth Avenue house, had loitered at an exhibition in a fashionable dealer's gallery. Largely because of the worldly prominence of subject and artist, it had been gaped at by loud admirers, had appeared in colour in a magazine, had shown up here and there in Sunday supplements. Ethel Warden, perhaps as a vindication of her first visit, sat for Nicolas now, while several women and one or two men of material ambitions awaited their turns; and, because he hadn't been self-depreciative, the winter's work would net Nicolas more than reputation.

The glitter of success wasn't without an alloy which he was sane enough to weigh. He realized if it weren't for his own position, if he had had no such original sitter, he would be hopelessly importuning dealers with his pictures. Eagerly, therefore, he sought the opinions of artists who had fought for honest rewards, but even most of those had their secular aims which

wouldn't let them lose sight of his name and connections; so he gave it up, learning to depend on his own judgment.

"If I charge enough," he used to sneer, "it will make precious little difference whether my stuff's glorious or rotten. In the eyes of those who pay it will be great."

He worked persistently to avoid trying to tear apart the distracting veils of the future; and his success, although reaching scarcely beyond the circle of his own acquaintances, brought the future nearer. The Ashmeads took it for granted it would hasten his marriage. It put a period for the time to hints of a personally conducted excursion through Wall Street. It placed him in a position to offer Janet a certain amount of comfort; but he wasn't deluded. Once they were married her parents would surround her with the old meaningless extravagance to which he would be attached as a perfecting touch. When she appeared to fall in with his simple plans she spoke leniently of a "cottage" in some resort of Mammon, and of "a cunning little shack" she had seen in a side street, the thought of whose rental was staggering.

Although the choice of a wedding day couldn't be indefinitely delayed he shrank from a final conference, because, he told himself, he hadn't yet reached the point where he could deny his mother's accusation. If she hadn't been right, wouldn't he have cast aside long before obstacles of pride to hurry Janet breathlessly to the dawn of their content? Did he merely seek excuses to delay a marriage to which he had, perhaps, too impetuously committed himself? Again he was swept with the necessity of forcing the proper mood of heart and mind, of making it up to Janet; for, in view of her satisfaction, what was done between them was manifestly beyond recall.

He laughed at his mother's worried accusations of overwork until the night she informed him indirectly of an enforced change. She commenced with the notice that she had that afternoon stumbled on Mrs. Ashmead at the Planters.

"Before long she is giving her husband a turn in the South."

"Daresay he doesn't care for it."

"Just the same," Mrs. Aldrich said, "he'll go."

Nicolas stirred restlessly.

"Heard some talk at Hill's End of a cruise next month. Why should people do what they don't care to?"

She studied him with a brooding smile which drew him to her.

"What is it?" he asked irritably. "You mean I shall go, too? Why not? You're not still nursing the idea I don't care enough for Janet?"

"Do you wish to go?" she asked, her eyes unwavering.

He tried to laugh.

"You don't deserve an answer, for you've just informed me that when the ladies decide, a man's preference gives up the ghost."

Her steady gaze supplied his mirth with its true value.

"You shouldn't laugh like that, my boy."

"But, Mother, why do you try to make me unhappy?"

As she drew him down and kissed him her eyes closed, and he fancied they were wet.

"If I'm the only one to make you unhappy——"

His summons didn't loiter. Janet delivered it at a dance a night or two later. Lady Mary Morley, she announced, would herd her, the Honourable Mary, and Hal southward the next week.

"Of course, dear man," she said easily, "you're coming with us."

He stiffened with resistance. Her voice took too much for granted, suggested too pointedly her acceptance of him along with the other gifts of her parents. He answered without further reflection:

"Out of the question."

She was pressed close as they danced about a crowded floor, yet he could feel distaste for the fragrant air, the overdone gilt and crystal, his voluble, jostling companions, the too gaudy dowagers who looked on with the sharp eyes of traffickers in youth. Her hair brushed his cheek, but he regretted the harsh companionships of peril and hunger, of a bivouac beneath the sky, or a billet in a peasant's house. It would have been easier for him if the war hadn't made him face reality.

Janet sulked.

"I should like to know why. You're not going to make me miserable?"

"Man of affairs," he said. "Can't dash off at a moment's notice."

She stopped dancing. She shuddered.

"The ravings of my own father! Find me a bracer, Nick. I need it."

He led her to the supper room and found a corner table half-screened by overhanging plants. Here and there groups gossiped over coffee or ices. Janet nodded across the room to Hal who sat with the Honourable Mary Morley. The pair impressed Nicolas as almost too restrained in their new state. An engagement hadn't routed the weariness of Mary's face or the dissatisfaction of Hal's; yet Hal had, as far as one could tell, clung to his resolution. Once or twice at the office Nicolas had observed him near Eleanor Grantley, aloof, disinterested, apparently incapable of straying from whatever business was in hand. As he watched his discontent now he had a distrust that Hal's manner at the office might be the concise modelling of a pose; but in that case would Hal let himself be led so easily to the South? No. His reformation was genuine enough; he merely exposed his too complete perception of its necessity.

Janet peered at Nicolas over her glass.

"Man of great affairs, you're through with Ethel. She told me so to-day."

"Did she add," he smiled, "that I am well started on Mrs. Glendon? You know the lady. She'd fly screaming after. Later, I hope——"

She put down her glass, interrupting him.

"How long?"

"By making her suffer, a fortnight."

"I'm fated," Janet complained. "This is the second conversation of the sort I've survived recently. The first was between Father and Mother. Its upshot was she's going to wait and drag him along in a couple of weeks. Fortunately it fits."

He nodded. For some time after Dicky Goodhue had taken

her to the dance floor he sat alone at the table, looking sympathetically at his cousin. They were going South for the same reason, because they had no choice. He smiled, reflecting how wise his mother was in many ways.

Nicolas schooled himself to look forward to the cruise as an opportunity to get himself in hand, to make it up to Janet; and it might have its less exacting side, a few days' polo, with luck; some fishing. He tried to enjoy the prospect when his cab swirled him from the slush of Seventh Avenue down the Pennsylvania Station driveway. Halfway across the concourse he came upon Mr. Grantley's brisk, resplendently groomed figure, and would have passed on with a nod; but the gray face beamed and a hand shot eagerly out.

"Mr. Aldrich! I congratulate myself!"

Nicolas paused and good-naturedly shook hands with the reclaimed scarecrow.

"Your affairs take you out of town occasionally?"

At first Mr. Grantley was puzzled, then his eyes lightened.

"Not to-day, Mr. Aldrich. I have been seeing my daughter started on a little journey."

A vacation during her employer's absence, Nicolas decided, and he nodded at the other's hazard that he was on his way South.

"You're quite settled?" he asked politely.

"Quite, Mr. Aldrich. A charming apartment."

Nicolas drew a happy inference from Mr. Grantley's speeding of his daughter, and couldn't resist placing it to the test.

"Then your family is quite reunited?"

The pleasure fled Mr. Grantley's face. He shook his head, and Nicolas had no need to press him. The courtly hand again.

"A pleasant vacation, Mr. Aldrich. I much prefer New York to the South."

He glanced anxiously around, as if fearing an attempt to abduct him to a Southern train.

"My memories aren't of the pleasantest, but with other people, happier recollections."

He wandered off in his brisk and aimless fashion, and Nicolas followed the porter to the platform.

As he paced beside the long train he glanced through the windows of crowded Pullmans, envying the anticipation of the travellers, trying not to wish he might journey with them to a holiday of his own choosing. Mr. Ashmead signalled haste from the rear of the train, and he hurried abreast of the car with its polished railings and its plate glass through which he glimpsed mahogany, tapestried furniture, flowers.

He saw Mrs. Ashmead in the living compartment, furnishing her customary illusion of reading. Then he glanced hurriedly away, aware that he had quite misconstrued Mr. Grantley's errand, for he had glimpsed opposite his hostess the ruddy hair and the oval, nearly colourless face of the failure's daughter. Unlike her companion, she made no pretence at any occupation beyond staring through the window at the iron prospect. Consequently she must have seen him, but with her perfect manner of a salaried inferior, she had let escape no sign.

Before meeting her father he had half expected her. Mr. Ashmead wasn't one to voyage so far without an office link. Her presence in the South need have no greater significance than it had possessed these past weeks in the office; but in view of the limitations of a private car and a houseboat, it should undoubtedly cause perplexities.

"Afraid you were cutting it a bit fine, Nick."

Nicolas followed Mr. Ashmead in, bent over Mrs. Ashmead, and offered his hand to Eleanor Grantley.

"I hadn't known you were booked," he said pleasantly, "for the playgrounds."

As she accepted his grasp he noticed her fingers no longer trembled, but why were they always so cold?

"I'm scarcely booked for play," she objected simply.

Mr. Ashmead helped her out with his pompous joviality.

"I'm dragged by the ear, Nick. No business leaving town at all now. Miss Grantley makes it barely possible."

As the train shot through the tunnel and curved across the Jersey flats Nicolas questioned if such enforced intimacy wasn't

the worst choice possible for a girl who had left her sordid moorings to embark on a glittering but impassable sea.

On the other hand, it might serve to point out her, woeful ignorance of the chart, and he watched her warily for signs of awkward navigation. Her very passivity was a safeguard, but dinner offered a reef she could scarcely elude; yet he saw her with a careless nod take the chair Mrs. Ashmead indicated. It was Mrs. Ashmead, in fact, who acknowledged the unwieldy moment, murmuring something about the insufferable conditions of travelling.

Passivity was just the pose that wouldn't do for Eleanor Grantley now. Her lack of common ground on which to stand with her companions must impress her with the permanence of her defeat. He tried, naturally, to talk to her, making subjects, but Mrs. Ashmead almost immediately occupied him with gossip in which the girl could have no share. Mr. Ashmead tried shop, and Nicolas, with a growing surprise, heard her answer easily, even offer an occasional pungent word of advice. Then he bobbed up again from his immersion in Mrs. Ashmead's froth to find that the girl had adroitly guided her employer from the law to a book about the South which people were reading a good deal just then. He stared as she disagreed with Mr. Ashmead on a question of taste.

"You're really not just, Mr. Ashmead. It's a fair picture of that life."

Mr. Ashmead wasn't at all displeased.

"How should you know, young woman?"

"Because," she answered simply, "I was born in such a town. I was a child when I left, so perhaps my opinion isn't worth a great deal."

Nicolas was amused when it developed Mrs. Ashmead sometimes read the prints she held in her hands. She asked an interested question. Eleanor Grantley answered. Nicolas offered an objection. Mr. Ashmead laughed. Somehow the girl had drawn the table together. The meal straggled lazily on while she accepted, without appearing to be aware of them, the ministrations of the servants. Breeding of a sort! But where had

she caught it? He recalled his admiration of her acting the morning Hal's engagement had been announced. Doubtless her wide eyes had studied useful examples, but he was inclined to think she had improved on her models. When he went to his stateroom he had no doubt as to who had torn from the evening its expected dullness.

Most of the following day, however, fell back to the normal with Nicolas assigned to Mrs. Ashmead, while Mr. Ashmead worked furiously with his secretary.

"Must store up for a rainy period," he apologized. "It will be hard enough to find an hour for work on the *Norma*."

For Hal, it was understood, already had his grandfather's houseboat in commission, and would have a wire for them at Miami appointing a rendezvous somewhere along the keys. Nicolas was glad to avoid the noisy, mixed, fashionable resorts, but he was confused by Hal's eagerness to flee them.

It wasn't until half an hour before dinner that Mrs. Ashmead released him and went to her stateroom. Nicolas, leaving his own a few minutes later, found work abandoned and the living compartment empty. He opened the screen door and stepped out, expecting to have the observation platform to himself. During a moment he hesitated, not at all sure he shouldn't retreat, for Eleanor Grantley sat back in a corner, a reflective figure; gazing along the contracting rails; appearing to search with her wide eyes, rather than a receding landscape, a rapidly vanishing past.

He overcame his reluctance and sat in the chair at her side.

"May I share the twilight?"

Her lack of response suggested a helplessness to deny him, and for a time he was glad to encourage her silence, counting the mileposts; shrinking, on his part, from the too swiftly approaching future.

The short-lived dusk was friendly to reflection. The plumed tops of the pines, waving in a light wind, had an appearance of brushing from the sky a single, low, crimson band. For all its greenery that sprang from turgid pools, the country conveyed the impression of a waste, smothering with its loneliness

the conventional voices of the train. His mood so precisely fitted hers that he made a point of evading it.

"Rather a change from last night. And to-morrow we'll be in the real tropics."

She started and glanced at him with an air of having been too rudely awakened, and he realized he had failed to destroy his feeling of sharing with her the sombre sincerity of a desert. Such surroundings were hostile to artifice. He spoke with a candid interest.

"You said last night, Miss Grantley, something about having come from the South. I rather guessed it the first time I saw your father."

She nodded, and continued to stare with the bewilderment of one awakening.

"It's odd you mention that just now."

She looked away, and he had a fear she was slipping again beyond reach.

"Why?" he asked.

She answered slowly, as if against her will:

"Because we are nearly within calling distance of the town in which I was born."

His clumsy interruption of her reverie could be repaired only by accepting its inferences.

"Then these are your woods," he said sympathetically.

She nodded.

"Dreary, ugly woods, most people think them."

"They remind me of the desert," he said, "which I like, because every detail that goes to its similarity differs from every other. When did you see your desert last?"

"Do you really care to know? What difference does it make?"

"None," he answered, annoyed at her habit of recession, "if my curiosity's at all intrusive."

Her denial came with an anxious rush.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Aldrich. I didn't mean that. I was ten—about—I think. You know so much already. You know where I went with my mother. It seemed a little disappointing to

pass so close without stopping to learn how much truth infantile memories hold."

"You mean," he asked, "the house you lived in, and——"

"Yes," she said, "because I can't help thinking the child must have dreamed all that."

Behind them a servant drew down the blinds. The trees had brushed the last colour from the sky. Close as she was, her form lost outline. He leant closer with a genuine compassion.

"Dreams that don't fit Third Avenue or Halloran's castle?"

Her laugh was bitter.

"Scarcely."

He wondered that it should be so difficult to express his comprehension. He had an instinct to do it through a clasp of the hand, as one would, in fact, comfort a child. But she had outgrown that. Such impulses were fantastic.

"I understand," he said. "I think your father suggested he had had bad luck. A pleasant house, I fancy. I am sorry. Perhaps you have a picture of the child in laces and ribbons?"

This time her laugh was soft.

"A supercilious little wretch with red hair!"

"Will you let me see it? I should enjoy seeing that infant."

He hadn't meant to say it, and at once sought means of disclaiming so confidential an interest; but before he could speak she had taken the situation in her own capable hands; had risen, demanding sharply:

"Haven't I amused you enough?"

He sprang up, detaining her, wishing he might grasp her shoulders and shake her for her impudence. For one who was so frequently there herself she had too easy a habit of placing others in the wrong.

"You're unjust," he said quickly. "Interest and amusement don't always coincide."

He grasped the brass rail at the rear of the platform. She paused at his side, palpably weighing his charge, seeking to express her too-lawful vindication. For a moment they peered, both waiting, at the rioting night which the train frantically endeavoured to outrun.

Before she could speak the screen door swung open, and with Mr. Ashmead's pompous tones the night won its race; the desert vanished.

"Jewish Creek! What an absurd name!"

The private car was ready for abandonment. Luggage filled the living compartment. The four stood on the observation platform with the train conductor, come to make sure they wouldn't miss their sketchy destination.

"You're almost the first passengers I've dropped here," the conductor replied to Mrs. Ashmead.

They were by now actually in a waste—a stretch of flat marsh with occasional glimpses of turquoise water; but Nicolas was more interested in the change that had come to Eleanor Grantley. Deliberately she seemed to have lifted herself from the Gothic setting which his vision of an artist had always given her, emerging from her stateroom after luncheon essentially an object for the sun. She stood now, swinging a straw hat at the end of its gay ribbons. Above her skirt and waist of white, soft cloth, her hair was like a crown of a metal so rare as to have become legendary. Beside her Mrs. Ashmead's more costly concessions to the climate seemed exaggerated.

Mangroves sprang up about the embankment on which the track was laid. The train rattled over a drawbridge and stopped beside a long, narrow platform flanked by three yellow shacks, raised on stilts, from which interested employees emerged. Nicolas bent over, seeking Hal. There he came, running along the platform. bronzed and dangerously handsome in his flannels.

"Jewish!" the conductor called, sprang the platform trap, descended, and offered a chivalrous hand.

"Mother-mine!"

Hal received Mrs. Ashmead in his arms.

"Hello, Father! Nick! It's a dull caravan, but Janet's primed to pound the tom-tom for you."

Then Nicolas knew Hal saw Eleanor Grantley as she descended the steps with long easy strides, ignoring the gallantry

of the conductor. Hal's face wasn't so brown it couldn't show red.

"Nobody mentioned you were coming, Miss Grantley."

His hand started forward and hesitated. Nicolas smiled. Evidently pledges weren't forgotten.

"Had to bring a corner of the shop," Mr. Ashmead explained cheerily. "These our men?"

While obvious landmen dressed as sailors invaded the car and brought the luggage down, Nicolas, puzzled by the swift change of her face, the fear in her usually inscrutable eyes, watched Eleanor Grantley. She had known she would find Hal. It couldn't be that. Her strangely timid eyes followed the close horizon, and Nicolas absorbed with her the stark desolation of the landscape. Aside from one or two invalid cocoanut palms on the low ground behind the shacks there was no vegetation beyond endless acres of mangroves. These thrust low, laurel-green banks, like some corrupt germination, out of black water on bleached roots that had the appearance of a confusion of bones, a carelessly arranged mortuary. Beyond the drawbridge the sluggish stream expanded into a large sound which was limited by the same melancholy growth. In every direction the skeleton mangroves seemed to close in, forbidding escape. Perhaps the sight of the launch, moored to pilings in the draw, brought the indifference back to the girl's face, or the gleaming enamel and brass of Beau Ashmead's houseboat, anchored far out in the sound.

With anxious regret Nicolas watched the private car whisked toward Key West and descended with the others to the launch. He glanced at Mrs. Ashmead, reflecting that the conditions of travel by houseboat would be scarcely less abominable than by train. He could separate, indeed, almost at once the welcoming group at the rail. There was Janet, leaning eagerly forward, waving a handkerchief; Lady Mary, clinging to a stanchion; her daughter, a trifle behind, looking on with erect indifference. When they were close he wasn't unprepared for the surprise expressed in Janet's face and voice as she called affectionate greetings. Her disapprobation was plainer when they had

climbed the ladder, and, with the exception of Eleanor Grantley, who had presumably sought her stateroom, stood together on the wide upper deck, aft. She projected into the reunion a not unnatural regret.

"Since you had to bring someone——"

"Why any one else?" Mr. Ashmead asked good-humouredly.

"At Hill's End, I didn't like——"

Her mother placed her finger on her lips.

"Cramped quarters, dear! Everything is heard on a boat. At Hill's End! That was your grandfather. She's quite prudent herself."

Janet shrugged her shoulders. Nicolas turned to Mary. Her face was more at peace than he had seen it since her first days in New York.

As he changed for dinner he admitted Janet's vexation had its excuse. A houseboat, even as extravagant as Beau Ashmead's, isn't a country house. There would be crowding of a sort, an inescapable intimacy; but Mrs. Ashmead, when they gathered on the upper deck later, faced the prospect cheerfully.

"Where," she asked, looking around, "is Miss Grantley? We'll have to take her *en famille*."

"Why not?" Mr. Ashmead asked lazily.

Mrs. Ashmead said a word to a steward who had emptied his tray, but Hal sprang nervously from his place on the skylight beside the Honourable Mary Morley.

"No bother. I'll rout her out."

"You're a good boy," his mother approved.

Nicolas frowned at the mangrove walls which narrowed to a creek. Hal had seemed too virtuous for honest reform, and his voice came from below now impatient and buoyant.

"Miss Grantley! Where do you hide? Mess gear!"

He ushered the slender white-clad figure to the deck. Mrs. Ashmead absent-mindedly slurred over a half introduction. The Honourable Mary Morley smiled at the secretary.

"I remember seeing you at Hill's End."

Janet whispered in Nicolas's ear:

"Father's spoiled our picnic."

Yet the really difficult place, Nicolas conceded, was occupied by Eleanor Grantley, and he watched her during dinner and afterward, admiring her tranquil insensibility.

When they emerged on deck the boat lay at anchor in the Bay of Florida, out of respect for the mosquitoes, to leeward of a large key. That and smaller and more distant islands were like sudden, uneven creases in the velvet-and-silver setting from which the deck radiated its brilliancy.

Could Eleanor Grantley possibly feel herself a facet of such a jewel? She seemed one, nevertheless, sitting over there in a deep chair, chatting with Mr. Ashmead. Where had she learned her repression? She had never before conceivably experienced such an hour, yet she appeared unconcernedly at home beneath the multi-coloured awning with its painted central lantern; among the tumbled, pleasantly contrasted cretonnes of settees and chairs; beside the wicker table laden with coffee, liqueurs, cigars, and cigarettes. She accepted the attentions of the silent stewards without any perceptible suspicion of their knowledge of her status. To become a part of it so gracefully her head must have long held visions of such an exotic state. She must have studied, rehearsed; reached by some such unlovely route her fitting manner.

Through experience Nicolas understood how little truth could be snatched from Eleanor Grantley's shell. She couldn't be such a fool as not to know she was a part of this fortunate circle merely on sufferance, that in the social scale she still swayed between her hostess and the stewards, inclining, if anything, toward the lighter balance.

"What are your thoughts worth, dear?"

Nicolas, lounging with Janet among the cushions of the skylight, laughed shortly, put down his coffee cup, and sauntered to the rail. Janet followed him.

"While I've missed you, Nick, I've explored and found the perfect retreat."

"Good!" he said, lighting a cigarette. "May I be shown?"

As they followed the deck they passed Hal and Mary, leaning silently on the rail amidships. Nicolas wanted to pause, but

Janet urged him to the front of the deck house into which a bench was built, lighted now only dimly by the high moon.

"Perfect?" she asked.

He stared, agreeing. He had been blaming himself for having come to this reunion without a thrill, for anticipating emotionlessly the prospect of sharing such a corner with Janet; and as he sat beside her he faced the necessity of telling a deliberate falsehood. For Janet's sake he must force himself to the unquestioning passion his mother was so confident he had never experienced.

"Have you missed me a lot, Nick?"

"Worked hard as I could," he evaded, "in order not to."

"Wish," Janet said, "I could have shared your trip down. Was it deadly?"

"No," he answered.

She lifted her head and examined him quizzically.

"Perhaps Father's newest stenographic obsession helped?"

"You don't like her, Janet?"

"Why should one like or dislike?" she asked, surprised. "As long as she's housebroken——"

"More than that, Janet. She gets through a difficult moment rather well."

She bent closer with mock anxiety.

"My dear! I know some men make a study of the habits of these delightful creatures. Not you, my own——"

It wasn't simple to get one's feet planted on the necessary course when Janet persisted in airing her abandonment of the youthful ignorance, which, in the old days, had been for him her most alluring quality; nor could he elude an instinct to defend that girl, who, without knowing it, had become the subject of small talk that had taken a tinge of the illicit. They had no business dragging her in; or, accepting facts for what they seemed worth, why wasn't Hal with her, instead of standing voiceless beside Mary Morley?

"Don't file people in pigeonholes, Janet."

"What do you mean?" she asked anxiously.

"Nothing more than that."

He managed a laugh.

"Although I might remind you I'm one of the steadiest of men."

She laughed back, unconsciously repeating the jarring note. ¹¹

"Which means the most suspicious of characters, doesn't it? But I know you, Nick, and I crave no other."

He stared along the path of the moon to where, with the appearance of an enormous raft, a nameless key floated. With all his heart he wished himself a partaker of its solitude. He drew back with the abruptness of a man who dreads disaster at the next step. What was he thinking of? If it had been only primitive emotion that had prompted him in the conservatory, that warmth at least ought to remain in his brain; but he sat unthrilled with Janet in this corner to which the sentimental moonlight barely penetrated; said nothing on impulse; made no gesture save at a calculated mental demand. If the old hunger had died, what was left to this bargain which at all costs he must see through?

Under the circumstances it was convenient his silence should suggest a passion beyond expression. She sighed.

"It is too beautiful, Nick, but one must think of others."

With a bewildered sensation of relief, he led this woman, whom he had contracted to marry, back along the deck to those others.

The group aft was significantly reduced, Lady Mary and Mr. Ashmead alone surviving. Mrs. Ashmead and the Honourable Mary, it was explained, had retired. Hal, out of the kindness of his heart, had just started Miss Grantley on a little constitutional. From time to time they appeared, pacing slowly about the deck house, and Nicolas wondered uneasily if the bland moonlight sent thrills to them.

"It's sweet of Hal," Janet commented.

Nicolas couldn't guess how sincere she was. He broke in impatiently:

"Hang it, Janet! Don't you think it counts that she's pretty?"

At first he was afraid he had given too much away. Then to

his amazement he saw that Janet had quite misunderstood, for she answered sharply:

"I can't see why you think her pretty."

A steward intervened with sandwiches and iced drinks. Hal put a period to his sweetness and brought Miss Grantley back. Mr. Ashmead yawned as he munched.

"Trains make me tired. Sleepy, Miss Grantley?"

Lady Mary made a point of speaking kindly to her.

"You ought to be worn out after two nights."

Nicolas thought she was about to deny it, but she nodded with a grateful smile.

Nicolas offered her a tray.

"Before you go—a bite?"

Absent-mindedly, without looking at him, she took a sandwich. He saw that her attention was held by the water with its path of silver, its vague and sombre islands.

"You like it?" he asked.

She shook her head almost vehemently. He couldn't understand why, since here among the keys she had at last seen come true some of her probable dreams of the garage.

"Perhaps," he groped, "it is because it is emptiness, full of empty things."

"Only those islands," she murmured. "growing from the water, and all empty!"

He indicated the single black patch in the moon's path.

"Can't you catch a happier impression?" he smiled. "Suppose you were there? Couldn't you fancy yourself drifting with it to mythical splendours?"

Again she shook her head.

"Only to emptiness. Don't you understand? Everything that lives here seems dead. Doesn't that make you afraid?"

She started for the companionway, glancing back with a wistful smile.

"I can't help it. It does me."

"What does what?" Hal asked, strolling over to Nicolas.

"Miss Grantley," Nicolas said, "fears bugaboos in our landscape."

Hal spoke scornfully.

"What nonsense! Jolly old place! Full of pleasant things. Heigh-ho! Bedtime. I'm off. Another day."

Nicolas during the remainder of the week observed Eleanor Grantley's methods with an increasing admiration. Whatever her goal, she travelled without perceptible effort. Because of her extraordinary success in eluding the contrasts with which it should have made her stand out awkwardly, the situation was really in her favour. Moreover, she had become a part of it, had given it fresh definition, had added new values.

For the first time Mr. Ashmead appeared to see her as something more than a useful secretary. Mrs. Ashmead, Lady Mary, and the Honourable Mary smiled upon her from a receding distance. Hal's good nature was unfailing. Janet alone hesitated to come nearer.

In the dainty luxuries of the dining-saloon Nicolas saw Eleanor Grantley more at ease than she had been among the pretentious vulgarities of her boarding house. She seemed to have a genius for controlling her tongue, yet she possessed as well enough tact to avoid conversational desertions. When the talk drifted into intimate channels she always managed to find someone to remain outside with her until the stragglers had returned. Most of all, the key to her success lay in the adroitness with which she stripped her presence of embarrassment for the others.

Yet Nicolas guessed that her victory was won at an exacting price. Her eagerness for the hours she spent working with Mr. Ashmead in the lounge confessed it; and once or twice, when she didn't know she was under observation, her wide eyes released an uneasy restlessness, and he saw recorded in her oval face a drooping, white exhaustion.

Mrs. Ashmead seemed pleased when Lady Mary suggested it was pleasant to have such a quiet, capable person about, adding that it was quite bewildering how she made so much of inexpensive clothing. Hal wasn't sure about the slighting qualification, but, of course, they set him right with sarcasm as to

the blank, sartorial ignorance of the male. He became almost too prominent a part of the new attitude, frequently calling the girl into the launch with the others for a fishing expedition, or a visit of exploration to an enticing key. The old doubts crowded back to Nicolas, mingled with anxiety for his cousin, with dread for Eleanor Grantley.

The evening before they reached Key West, from his state-room window, he saw a rowboat approach a round key off which the houseboat lay at anchor. From shellmounds cocoanut palms lowered lazy fronds in a screen through which one might pass to a complete privacy. He looked closer. There were only two persons in the boat, a man and a woman. Hal had gone back to his system of Hill's End; had taken Eleanor Grantley off alone. Nicolas was less surprised by Hal's weakness than by the fact that she had yielded to it. He hastened to the deck, which was empty, reconstructing Hal's ambush. Mr. Ashmead, the last to descend, had left Eleanor Grantley picking up her work in the lounge. Hal must have sprung upon her then, but after the afternoon in the library at Hill's End she should have grasped her obvious means of escape; Mrs. Ashmead had said everything is heard on a houseboat. In surrendering she had made her first false step.

Nicolas drew an easy chair to the rail and lighted a cigarette. The red sun blazed violently as if appalled at its approaching immersion in the expectant sea. It blazed upon the figures in the boat, but it could not hold them in the light for long. They seemed summoned by the drooping trees.

From the distant East Coast extension a locomotive whistle shrilled. It might remind Hal, as it did Nicolas, that their wilderness impinged on an ordered civilization.

The sun was extinguished. The rowboat held steadily on its course and reached the beach. The slender white figure stepped out without taking the man's offered hand. For a time the two walked slowly along the shore, visible to any one who might chance to look from a window, but behind the screen of palms they could talk unseen. Now and then they paused, facing each other, as though arguing, perhaps, that very point. At

last Hal seemed to have got his way, for Eleanor Grantley turned, and, at his side, approached the heavy foliage.

Nicolas rose and moved restively about. Would she let Hal lift the curtain? In spite of his reluctance his glance kept straying to the key. The two had paused at the edge of the grove, plainly at argument again, since Hal moved his hands assertively, while she nodded or shook her head. She must have reached a decision, for Hal's hands fell, and she turned and walked purposefully toward the boat. He sprang after her. Something he said evidently brought her up. She waited for him, and again they seemed to talk, but only for a moment. They continued to the boat. She entered and settled herself gracefully in the stern. Hal shoved off and took the oars.

Nicolas tossed his cigarette over the rail. Its hissing in the water startled him from a maze of doubts and fears. Of course she never could have passed behind that screen, yet she had started.

Why did his heart beat too fast? Because he was anxious for the Morleys and the Ashmeads; he had given Janet his promise. There was more than that. Hang it! Wasn't the girl herself worth a thought? Yet she had let Hal take her to the Pantheon, had followed him to the end of the pond.

While the rowboat zigzagged about, with Hal occasionally thrusting a long, barbed pole in the water, the others straggled up.

"What's Hal at?" Janet wanted to know.

"Looks like crawfish or conches," her father offered.

A good enough subterfuge, Nicolas acknowledged, to bring the pair naturally back; but Hal's flourishes were almost too pronounced when he scraped alongside and sent a brace of crawfish to the gallery. His companion, on the other hand, had lost none of her tranquillity.

"Seldom our Harold takes so much pains to entertain," Janet murmured dryly.

Nicolas hoped she had glanced from her stateroom window, had had her eyes a trifle opened; and during dinner he kept Eleanor Grantley under observation, but wasted his effort.

It wasn't until later that he learned by chance that the drama of the beach hadn't left her unmoved. Walking the deck with his cigar, he saw someone crouched in a corner of Janet's retreat. He paused.

"Hello! Who dreams?"

No answer, no movement followed, and he bent closer, guessing.

"Why brood in a loneliness one hates, Miss Grantley?"

Her reply confessed an effort.

"I sometimes like loneliness."

He tossed his cigar over the rail and sat down.

"Bad for one. Somebody's been nasty?"

"Everyone is too kind," she whispered.

"Then see here——"

He raised his hand and touched her cheek. He knew the gesture was reasonless, and he didn't wonder she should shrink away.

"Your cheek is wet," he announced gravely. "Why should you cry?"

She straightened. Her voice vibrated with anger.

"Why do you always come to me when I want to hide things?"

He laughed.

"I can go." But he made no move, and he asked after a moment: "What can you possibly have to hide?"

She stood up, walked to the rail, and faced the screen of palms that had in the moonlight an air of seduction.

"You're quite right," he said, following her. "I shouldn't have disturbed you."

She turned back, an odd smile twitching at her lips.

"I'm ungrateful, but I wasn't crying."

"The truth, you know, does no harm now and then," he said. "You were. Your cheek was wet."

"You had no right to find that out," she answered. "If I was crying, it was because I hate this loneliness."

"One doesn't cry for hatred," he pointed out. "One does for——"

He hesitated. Quiet steps approached but, before she hurried away with her convenient tact, she completed his sentence and justified his intrusion.

"For—fear, Mr. Aldrich?" she whispered. "Yes, one does."

Astonishment rose from the *Norma's* deck the next afternoon as she crawled past the forts and anchored in the inner harbour of Key West amidst a confusion of small yachts and disreputable sponging and fishing craft. The communal surprise expressed itself in recognition of Driggs Wandel, who, flanked by two automobiles and a pair of pleased hackmen, waved vociferously from the nearest wharf.

"Thought he was dodging the Wild West at Palm Beach," Hal said as the launch ferried them across.

Nicolas, too, questioned why Driggs should have chosen a visit to Key West at this particular moment.

"Fact is," Wandel drawled, accepting their greetings, "Mrs. Warden gave the *Norma's* course away, and I was so bored by other people's rotten bridge and brilliant golf I made up my mind to meet the truly great. Caught your lightning craft speeding by the hotel some hours ago—perhaps not quite that bad, though its velocity astonishes one—and I didn't see why I shouldn't busy myself in your behalf."

He swung, moving his hand in a majestic gesture. One of the waiting hackmen advanced with agility. He was a wiry, swarthy West Indian, clothed, one would have said, from those perfect plates in the backs of magazines. His straw hat was immaculate, his brilliant necktie knotted with stiff precision. Perhaps avarice gleamed in his eyes and conditioned his smile, but every atom of him expressed a single aim in life, to please—at a price.

"San Salvador!" Wandel announced proudly. "I recommend him and his trusty assistant."

Mr. Ashmead was augustly amused.

"You'll do as well as another, San Salvador."

The wiry fashion plate appeared outraged.

"Better, dear sair. San Salvador knows everything, every-

body. His automobile are the best. He get you what you like—oh, anything! He take you where you please to go."

Nicolas believed him thoroughly, and was sorry that Wandel had ferreted out such a paragon; for Hal, who hadn't missed the outburst of self-glorification, climbed to the front seat beside him. The man carried the party and its luggage swiftly enough, however, to the hotel at the water's edge, then parked his cars and waited for more profit.

Mr. Ashmead expressed his pleasure at being ashore by getting in touch, through Miss Grantley and the telegraph, with his office; the women, by hurrying through tea and seeking their rooms; Hal, after loafing on the terrace with Nicolas and Wandel for awhile, by strolling toward the carriage entrance.

"Fellow San Salvador is a type," he explained. "Going to show me the town. Curious old place!"

"Pray don't spoil our buccaneer," Wandel advised. "Isn't wise for either party."

Hal laughed uncomfortably and disappeared.

"I wonder," Wandel drawled, "if Hal knows this is your first visit to Key West."

"It isn't," Nicolas answered, but he, too, had been surprised that Hal had chosen to occupy San Salvador alone.

"I must confess," Wandel was drawling, "I wasn't prepared to have Mrs. Warden tell me Mr. Ashmead had brought his Botticelli to the South. Not so simple for her, either, not to come to unidealized life."

"She's managed to avoid it," Nicolas said.

Doubts that had been in his mind since the night he had shared her reverie on the observation platform offered themselves for Wandel's valuation.

"She has breeding of a sort."

Wandel's smile was derisive.

"So, my dear genius, has Father Grantley."

"Exactly," Nicolas took him up, "and I should like to know what that amounts to. You're a social observer."

"As such," Wandel yawned, "I see a minimum of breeding."

"Come, now, Driggs, be serious. How far does family count?"

"I shall be serious," Wandel announced. "It counts precious little without a settled background, trimmed, one might add, with at least a line of guilt."

"You and I have that," Nicolas mused.

"Therefore," Wandel said, "it counts for us in New York, and, to an extent, in London or Paris, let us say, where our families are connected with native tribes. Do you think it would amount to as much in Teheran or Dallas?"

"Then what does count," Nicolas asked irritably, "when you leave your own and enter fresh territory?"

"Money and persistence," Wandel smiled, "have been known to construct most stupendous backgrounds in a minimum of time. It would be sad lack of breeding for me to mention——"

"Beau Ashmead?" Nicolas asked. "Why not? I've always admired him. But I've one objection, Driggs. Breeding doesn't vanish the moment it's torn from its background."

Wandel stared at him.

"I disagree with you thoroughly, because it's the background that makes one pose to fit its colours. Aren't you nine tenths animal? I am. We all are. Therefore, we tend to go back to rooting in the woods and swallowing our food with odd, unaffected noises of satisfaction."

With a wary instinct—and he questioned how much of animal cunning there was in that—Nicolas veered away from the subject. Of course Wandel was right. A child's exaggerated memory of a small town house; her contemplation of a photograph made with all her finery, accounted for none of Eleanor Grantley's charm. That must have been constructed from her study of other people's backgrounds. Why wasn't it enough? But he knew Driggs would tell him it wasn't, that such breeding had the quality of a false gem.

"What say to taking a swim with odd, unaffected noises of satisfaction?"

Wandel agreed, hoping they might find Hal at the pavilion; and, when they didn't, ventured a wish that San Salvador would return him from his exploration of the town not too highly elated.

During dinner on the terrace Hal's cheerfulness did appear abnormal, expressing itself in a fantastic fondness for Key West, a desire to linger on.

"San Salvador seems to have done you rather well," Janet accused him.

"Plenty of cheer," Hal said, "but I resisted it to the bitter end."

Nicolas believed him and was perplexed. Eleanor Grantley's presence at the table, requested out of habit by Mrs. Ashmead, wasn't sufficiently exceptional to account for Hal's good nature. Nicolas glanced at her for an explanation and paused to ask himself if he hadn't dreamed the emotion she had let through last night, for now she detached herself from the other women on the thinly populated terrace chiefly because of her white and cold repose.

"How," Wandel mused when they were left alone with their cigars, "does our Simonetta cling to her perfectly behaved waves?"

Hal glanced up. His feverish cheerfulness had evaporated into moodiness.

"What are you mumbling, Driggs?"

"Nothing of interest," Wandel drawled.

Mr. Ashmead was lured by the telegraph. Hal looked at his watch and rose.

"Come, you two chaps."

"And where?" Wandel asked lazily.

Hal shifted his feet.

"A little expedition I've arranged with San Salvador."

"Are you keen, Nicolas, after expeditions?" Wandel asked.

"Not keen," Nicolas answered.

"Nor I. Sleepy place."

Hal's voice choked with real appeal.

"It isn't often I ask a favour. Won't take you long."

"Might one," Wandel asked, "inquire into the nature of the entertainment?"

"You might," Hal said angrily, "if you wanted to be disagreeable. I'm not asking for a great deal of your time."

"Since he puts it that way," Wandel drawled, "we'd better share our Harold's follies within reason."

Nicolas laughed.

"Done, but I shrink from mysteries."

"Then come and see how little mystery there is," Hal said anxiously.

He led them to the carriage entrance, and walked past the car in which San Salvador lounged.

"What!" Wandel cried, "isn't my very own discovery to conduct us?"

San Salvador showed his white teeth.

"I am already engaged, sair, but my assistant knows nearly as much as I."

Hal had entered the other automobile. Nicolas and Wandel followed. The driver, without apparent directions, swung toward the town.

"Now for our plans," Nicolas proposed.

But Hal shook his head and refused to speak. With a quick movement of his shoulders Wandel lay back and made no effort to break the silence.

Almost immediately into Nicolas's brain entered the tolling of a bell at minute intervals. The sonorous strokes vibrated with portentous melancholy.

"What is that bell?" he asked the driver.

"A funeral," the man answered gaily. "It will soon be over."

They seemed to approach the doleful clanging. When they turned into a side street Nicolas conceived a shrinking belief that the source of that measured sound was their destination.

The automobile slowed, crawling along the right-hand curb, crowded by a black procession led by an open hearse. Nicolas was glad when they had passed the last dingy carriage. He glanced at Wandel. The little man had shrunk back in his corner. It was too dark to read his face. His own curiosity as to Hal's intention was drowned in a profound depression whose growth seemed measured by the resonant iron strokes.

The driver swung the automobile around, and, as the last of the procession vanished, drew up at the opposite sidewalk. The bell ceased its mournful message. Nicolas with a sigh looked about him. They had paused before a frame church out of whose dimly lit interior a few people still straggled to disappear silently in one direction or another. In a minute, save for themselves, the street was empty.

Hal stepped down.

"Here we are."

"Perhaps," Wandel drawled without moving, "you won't mind my confessing your tastes pain me. Besides, I might point out, that the entertainment, such as it was, is concluded."

"Get out," Hal commanded under his breath. "There'll be another show."

Wandel whistled softly, an accurate admission of his shock, and slipped to the sidewalk. Nicolas followed, his brain confusedly and unwillingly accepting the intimations of the past few minutes. Through the open doorway of the church he glimpsed an obscure interior which moment by moment became less defined until only one light remained burning before an altar. Into its yellow pallor slipped a shadowy figure in a black surplice whose form seemed a visible concentration of the grief that lingered in the funereal building.

Desperately Nicolas turned to a group of oleanders that caught the rays of a street lamp. Their white, fragrant blossoms were vivid, hopeful, living. They seemed contemptuous of the mournful structure against which they grew, suggesting that its interior with its single lamp, its black-robed guardian, possessed no more elements of real tragedy than a mirage.

But Wandel gave it a more substantial value. Nicolas aroused himself at the sound of the little man's voice.

"Before we take another step, my Harold, you'll outline the nature of the show."

While Hal looked at his watch Nicolas waited tensely.

"You're not fools," Hal jerked out. "You know why I brought you here. In five minutes I am going to marry Miss

Grantley. San Salvador helped with the arrangements this afternoon—license, church, dominie—need a couple of witnesses. A man would like his own friends.”

Anger and revolt crowded Nicolas’s brain, but Wandel hindered for a time their expression, arguing coolly.

“And you knew perfectly well we wouldn’t come if you told us what you wanted.”

“Save your breath,” Hal shot out. “It’s no use. Will you see me through?”

“At the price,” Wandel smiled, “of watching you make an utter bust of yourself, of never being tolerated by your family again? Isn’t that asking a good deal of Nick?”

“You’re mad, Hal,” Nicolas managed.

“In a sense,” Hal confessed, glancing at his watch.

He paused, listening intently. From a distance the whirring of an automobile became audible. He squared his shoulders.

“Call me what you like. Don’t you suppose I’ve thought it out? I’ve been through a bit of brimstone. I know when I’m licked.”

“And we,” Wandel said on a vicious note, “will complete the lesson. Back to the hotel, Nick!”

Hal laughed hysterically.

“Go to the devil if you want. By the time you’d alarmed the family it would be fifteen minutes over; for, if you make me, I can use San Salvador and his man to get it through.”

The automobile was nearer. Wandel bowed to defeat.

“He’s right, Nick. What can we do to save this maniac?”

“Don’t worry,” Hal said. “Nothing can stop me marrying that girl. It’s the only way——”

Nicolas sprang at him, grasped his arm.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Have you thought of Mary?”

Hal looked up, his face in the dim light full of his torture.

“Don’t do that, Nick! I’m sorry. I can’t think of anything until this is over. Afterward—I’ll straighten it out somehow.”

Nicolas drew back, stiffening, at the point of attack. He felt Wandel's arm on his sleeve, heard his insinuating voice.

"Hal's left his background. Don't, Nicolas, let us desert ours."

"I'll have nothing to do with it," Nicolas muttered. "Good God! It's incredible."

The automobile was close. They could see it swiftly approaching along the street. Hal moistened his lips.

"For her sake?"

Nicolas shook his head, continued the motion automatically while San Salvador halted his car at the curb, while Hal stepped forward and helped the single white figure to descend from the rear seat. Bitterly Nicolas realized she had had no friends to involve.

Her face, without their life and hope, was whiter than the oleanders. He stared at her with headlong hostility. She had beaten them all, had altered Hal's essential character, had got what she wanted. This was her moment of triumph.

He saw her slender figure sway, saw Hal catch her, heard him speak throatily.

"It's all right, my dear, my dear——"

He raised his voice.

"Bring your man, San Salvador. We may need you."

While Nicolas and Wandel watched he led her across the sidewalk, the sinister pair conveniently at their heels. Down the aisle from the altar, with the soundlessness of a phantom, stalked the dark-robed priest. At the top of the steps the sight of this figure seemed to galvanize the girl. She turned quickly from the melancholy temple and its one attendant. She freed her arm from Hal's grasp. In the light of the street lamp her eyes shone with the fulfilment of the fear Nicolas had seen lurking in them last night.

"Mr. Ashmead——"

Hal grasped her, startled; tried to lead her on. She drew away again. Her voice was still suppressed for all its anguished feeling.

"I'm sorry. I thought I could. I can't. I tell you, I can't! You must let me go!"

She eluded his frantic hands. As Nicolas and Wandel started for her, she stumbled down the steps. But Hal leapt after, caught her, drew her determinedly back. His voice rose, echoed in the sombre church, brought the black-robed man to a pause on the threshold.

"What's the matter with you? You're going to see it through. Come here. Listen——"

IX

FLIGHT

HIS dazed appreciation of the slender white figure swaying in Hal's grasp on the church steps crowded Nicolas's brain with a savage desire for violence he hadn't dreamed a man could experience outside the unreasoning carnality of battle. As he sprang forward, intent on releasing Eleanor Grantley and punishing Hal, it was, curiously, San Salvador, the true barbarian, who raised his hand and voiced a warning of ordered penalties.

"Sair! No trouble here! The barracks are close."

Wandel laughed nervously.

"He's right, Nick. Let's not inconvenience the marines."

He grasped Nicolas's arm and drew him back. In an ironical tone, designed to recall him, he spoke to Hal.

"Plainly Miss Grantley cares rather less for your entertainment than we do."

Hal released her, but his glance, angry and unbelieving, held her for a moment at his side; yet she seemed without the power to quench the curiosity that blazed in all their eyes; was at first even incapable of retreat. Her lips opened. She spoke with an effect of somnambulism.

"We must never mention this again."

As one awaking, indeed, in unforeseen surroundings, she commenced to tremble, turned blindly, and started down the steps. Hal ran after and halted her on the sidewalk.

"It's got to be mentioned," he said hoarsely. "You don't expect to cry off without a word! You agreed to this last night on the island——"

"Yes," she interrupted him, "but since then it's all changed. I didn't know."

He stretched out his hands. His emotion was genuine and austere.

"Nothing's changed. Don't make me beg this way, Eleanor. Don't make me suffer. Everything's ready. We're all here to see it through: Nick, Driggs."

"And since I'm here," Wandel drawled with calculated brutality, "you'll permit me to suggest that Miss Grantley may have too much regard for you to exile you from your family and friends. I dare say she doesn't hunger, either, to condemn herself to drag after a disillusioned man through the ugliest time imaginable; the interminable, sordid hours of an outcast."

Nicolas caught his purpose. Its expression was probably just enough, yet for her it seemed an unnecessary cruelty. She accepted it, however, as a tonic. The light from the corner showed livelier colour in her face, she stood straighter, seemed more in command of herself.

"Thanks, Mr. Wandel. You're very kind."

Wandel drew back, staring at her curiously, while Hal begged her not to listen.

"It isn't true. Give me a chance to prove it. I want you. Don't send me back to the devils of starvation."

Slowly she shook her head, indicating the mournful void of the church. Nicolas could guess with what a weight of depression it must burden her troubled spirit. He half expected her to turn to him as her custom had been in such of her difficult moments as he had shared; instead she beckoned San Salvador.

"Please take me back to the hotel."

She crossed the sidewalk and entered the rear seat of the automobile. Nicolas climbed in after her.

"You won't mind my going along?"

Her laugh was bitter.

"I'm quite safe now. I need no more watching."

"Try not to misunderstand," he said.

Wandel placed himself beside San Salvador in the front seat. The grinding of the gears galvanized Hal. He ran forward,

but at a word from Wandel the car glided away. Glancing back, Nicolas saw the helpless, astonished man at the curb, looking after them, his hands raised in the gesture of a mendicant who is outraged and unconvinced that the alms for which he has abased himself have been permanently withheld.

As the car gathered speed the night air aroused Nicolas as from a phantasm of diseased dreaming. He shook off the leaden impression of a vital detail missed—the slow and dismal tolling that had measured the progress of the cortège in whose track Eleanor Grantley, Wandel, and he followed. For each had left something vital back there; and the melancholy church had sent them forth heavy with the realization of their loss. His very cruelty seemed to have snatched from Wandel all his assurance. He sat bent forward, as if ashamed. Nicolas's original, skeptical appraisal of Eleanor Grantley, to which he had for so long clung, had died. Scarcely understanding why, the loss seemed ominous, fraught with graver disasters. But it was Eleanor Grantley who had left most—a dazzling triumph toward which she had walked with an easy, undeviating persistence. And that was her own fault. Face to face with her success she had killed it and turned resolutely away.

Nicolas tried to outline her motive; for, side by side with the death of benefits, many women of her class would risk their souls for, as if vivified, indeed, by that inexplicable disintegration, dangerous factors had been brought into being. As his mind accepted the outlines of their twisted and mischievous forms, Nicolas felt a sharp regret that she hadn't accepted the pilotage of the sombre priest through the worst of the breakers, hadn't sailed safely to the shelter Hal had offered.

Through her incomprehensible sacrifice she had snapped the only link connecting her with the sort of life she manifestly hungered for; a world she had actually touched with an unreal grace, a deceptive congruity. By her own choice she had separated herself from the party, had made it impossible for her to retain her prosperous place with Ashmead and Warden, had published her understanding of the worthlessness of a similar situation. What, then, was left for her? He couldn't fancy her

pride suffering her mother's sharp recriminations or her father's absurd optimism. Since, moreover, she had refused the splendour Hal had begged her to take, Nicolas wondered if she could endure the less-profitable and more personally costly pomp with which Clarice perpetually tempted her.

On the other side she had placed the Ashmeads, and, to an extent, the Morleys, enormously in her debt, but to open their eyes would be no easy task.

"We must never mention this again," she had said; yet the subject had to be brought up at once, at least among those who shared the secret.

Nicolas glanced at her. She lay back, inanimate, in her corner. He thought her eyes were closed.

"Miss Grantley," he said softly.

She stirred.

"We'd better not talk of it," she said.

Nicolas became aware of Wandel's intent listening, was sorry for it, wished himself alone with her.

"There's only this to say," she went on. "I don't want you to have a wrong idea."

She indicated Wandel's tense back.

"Like—like him. I didn't do it for the Ashmeads or Lady Mary."

"For whom?" he asked.

She laughed bitterly.

"For myself. That sounds odd, doesn't it?"

"When one thinks of the future it does," he agreed.

She failed to accept his lead, so that he had to put the direct question.

"What are you going to do now?"

Still she didn't speak.

"Miss Grantley! That must be thought of!"

"There's a great deal to be thought of," she said a little hysterically.

She retired behind her dejected defense of silence. Without the courage to face it all at once, she probably recognized her alarming situation. Nicolas sought unsuccessfully for means

to break down her reserve, to make her, in spite of herself, accept his help.

The automobile had hurried through the principal street. Ahead the lights of the hotel sparkled. Between scattered buildings, far out in the Straits, a large, glowing ship made a swift diagonal through the shoals toward the harbour.

"What boat is that?" Nicolas asked.

"The Havana boat, sairs," San Salvador informed them. "She is very late to-night. She carry very many passengers home from Cuba."

Nicolas forgot about it because just then the car swerved along the driveway and drew up at the hotel entrance. Wandel, with a nervous eagerness, was the first out, running around and offering himself, as quickly as Nicolas could, to help Eleanor Grantley alight. She, however, with an air of aversion, stepped past them both and hurried into the hotel. Wandel went purposefully at her heels. It occurred to Nicolas that the little man, after his cold brutality at the church, might more decently have left her alone; and chance backed him, for none of the party was about. The lounge, in fact, was deserted save for the night clerk behind the desk in a far corner. Wandel's call was half appeal and half command.

"Miss Grantley!"

She turned antagonistically. From the very exhaustion of her oval face her beauty had acquired a more enticing fragility. Wandel seemed caught by it. He spread his hands and bowed his head.

"You behold the most contrite of men."

She waited with apparent indifference, and before her lack of curiosity Wandel was at a loss. It was only when she started again for the elevators that he burst out:

"I don't need to tell you why. I think I misunderstood. I want you to know I acknowledge my grave fault. If one might make amends—— Could it be talked of in the morning?"

Her smile was grateful, but she said nothing, so Nicolas walked at her side to the elevators.

"Tell me again," he muttered, "it's none of my affair, but I

shan't pretend something out of the way hasn't happened to-night."

She glanced at him scornfully.

"You're trying to be very honest, aren't you? Then why didn't you have the courage to say at the church what Mr. Wandel did?"

"If I didn't think it——"

"But you did," she interrupted. "It was in your face. I'd rather you had said it. All along you've imagined that was what I was after."

"At Hill's End——" he reminded her. "And last night you did go to the island with him; and, at least, to the church to-night. What changed your mind? Don't judge me harshly. for I don't know what to think."

"Why think of it at all?" she asked wearily. "There's little enough to think about now. It's quite finished for me—everything."

He was startled by her suggestion of finality. Was she, under stress of emotion, capable of some dangerous folly?

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply. "What are you going to do?"

"Mr. Wandel," she answered, "suggested we might let that go over until morning. You must see I am very tired to-night."

That lessened his apprehension, since it hinted she'd do nothing in a hurry. He offered his hand, and this time she accepted it. While her slender fingers rested, cold and inexpressive, in his broad palm, he studied her wide eyes, but before their undiminished secretiveness he looked away, abashed, wondering if he would ever draw from their depths more than a wistful beauty.

In his grasp her hand became alive; sent to his heart a pleasant, resistless warmth. Then the long fingers slipped away, and he knew he hadn't the strength to hold them.

"I will see you in the morning?" he called after her.

But she had stepped in the elevator. With a harsh significance the iron door clanged shut.

Nicolas found Wandel on the terrace.

"Where," he asked uneasily, "is everyone?"

"Left word at the desk," Wandel answered, "they'd gone across to the Club to amuse themselves. We're supposed to follow, but an excuse can be found."

"Rather," Nicholas agreed. "It's Hal we want to see."

"Obviously," Wandel drawled, "and it's not a joyous prospect. I've sent San Salvador scouting, but I don't see much beyond shame to keep our Harold away. Doubtless he'll realize the wisdom of sealing our mouths."

"Can they be sealed?" Nicolas mused.

"You mean Mary," Wandel said.

"It's difficult, Driggs. Can you suggest——"

Wandel laughed.

"Less than nothing. Of course, Mary's your cousin, but do you think Lady Mary or the Ashmeads would thank you for raising such a wind?"

Nicolas remembered Janet's asking him to help bring Mary and Hal together. Now circumstance had given him a more exigent, an infinitely harder duty to urge them apart.

"At any rate," he muttered, "the raising of the wind should be in Mary's hands."

"Wish you luck of the job in getting it there," Wandel sneered. He pressed Nicolas's arm.

"Would it surprise you, Nick, to learn I'm rather more concerned with our assured little climber who suddenly topples herself off the ladder?"

He lighted a cigarette, puffed it fitfully.

"Fact is," he went on with a grimace of distaste, "I'm punishing myself for what I said about disillusionment and outcasts. Dashed unnecessary. She wasn't likely to change her mind."

"It hurt her," Nicolas said.

"Gad, how it hurt her!" Wandel agreed. "Seemed the thing at the time, for both their sakes. But, true as it is, she hadn't earned it. Give you my word, Nick, in her place, once the poor fish had taken the bait I'd have hooked him like a flash. Why didn't she?"

"I've been asking myself that," Nicolas said. "What is she going to do now? She'll have to cut, unless Hal does."

"Hal won't," Wandel promised, "so long as the flame remains convenient for his charred wings."

He pointed to a figure emerging from the young shrubbery by the sea wall.

"Isn't that Romeo, communing with his soul? Odds he's been to the desk and tried to get a word to her or with her. That's where she's placed herself in an awkward fix, for if she runs, Hal's pretty sure to trail—to find out why, to try his luck again."

"We might spare her that," Nicolas said determinedly.

Wandel shrugged his shoulders.

"Think so? Try."

But Nicolas didn't underestimate the strength of the weapon he held against Hal. He led Wandel across the lawn. Hal looked up and waited for them; even at a distance an aggressive figure.

"You've done a pleasant job, the two of you," he attacked them. "If you'd kept your mouths shut it would have come off; I wouldn't be torturing my brain to find out how it happened, how it could have happened."

"Some day," Nicolas said, "you'll realize how fortunate it is it didn't come off. One tries to think you were out of your head. If you're not now, you'll have a sudden call North to-night."

The picture of the boat rolling through the Straits came back to him.

"Fortunately the boat train's leaving late."

"Fine medicine," Wandel encouraged. "New faces, fresh scenes; give things a chance to blow over——"

Hal turned on his heel.

"At least try to keep your mouths shut about the whole show, and I won't have any more interference."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," Nicolas called after him.

But Hal walked away, ignoring the threat.

For a long time after Wandel had left the garden Nicolas paced the paths as restless and irresolute as Hal had been; at times, he was inclined to think, as completely unhappy.

The hot, still day started reluctantly. The terrace and the gardens lay deserted in the white glare. Nicolas waited for someone to appear. Would Eleanor Grantley actually discuss her situation with him and Wandel? Such a conference wouldn't amount to much, for the sleepless night had solved none of her problems, or Mary's.

The appearance of Janet at ten o'clock, fresh, brilliant, cheerful, only increased Nicolas's suspense. Hal's action had measurably widened the distance across which Nicolas these past weeks had greeted his fiancée. To talk to her at all, in view of her ignorance, was nearly impossible.

"What is the matter with you?" Janet teased him. "You didn't come to the club. I'd never fancied Key West so crowded with attractions."

He offered random apologies. He led her relentlessly along the sea wall, making conversation from a boat, a group of bathers; attempts that left her staring with growing curiosity until her father presented more stimulating speculations. He came hurrying across the lawn, hatless, his face angry and bewildered.

"Have you any idea, Janet," he cried, "what's become of Miss Grantley?"

Nicolas looked away, convicted of unjustifiable thoughtlessness. Somehow he should have kept in touch with her; for he had no doubt she had left, too hurriedly, without a destination. He was so sure of it he had an impulse to cry:

"No use searching. Miss Grantley has cut out. You've seen your last of her."

"Been to the desk, tried to get her room. No answer," Mr. Ashmead was complaining. "She isn't the sort to take a morning off without a word. Important wires from the office. I've got to be getting North; I need her right away."

Janet dug her parasol in the sand. She spoke in a hard, resentful tone that aroused Nicolas's attention.

"Don't take it out on me, dear Father. I'm not a guardian of giddy typists."

"Where's Hal?" Nicolas demanded.

Mr. Ashmead moved his hand in a discouraged gesture.

"Scouting. Rotten temper, himself! What did you and Driggs lead him into last night?"

Then Hal hadn't commenced the pursuit. At Nicolas's first glimpse of him, indeed, a few minutes later, it was patent that Eleanor Grantley's disappearance had caught the troubled man completely unawares. His face was haggard and concerned. His eyes questioned. Almost reluctantly he offered an envelope to his father.

"Clerk had this. He's just come on. Said Miss Grantley gave it to him last night. Insisted on his seeing it delivered instead of leaving it in the box."

"From Miss Grantley!" Mr. Ashmead cried. "What's all this mystery?"

"Probably the solution's inside," Janet offered.

Her father ripped open the envelope and with a deepening frown read the enclosure.

"Oh, too stupidly unfortunate! Confuses everything."

He looked up, surprised, as Hal reached eagerly for the letter. Janet, however, was quicker, got the sheet from her father, and scanned the brief message. Her expression was relieved rather than startled.

"She's sacked herself!"

"Why?" Hal snapped.

Janet examined her brother with cool disapproval.

"Bad news, she says. No way to let any one know. Jumped at chance to catch the boat train, which left late. Awfully sorry. Think she might be. That ends her."

Mr. Ashmead's quick spring to his secretary's defense gauged her dominance of his whims.

"What's up with you, Janet? You don't imagine anything but an emergency would have carried her off? Somebody's ill. If she'd waited till to-night she could have gone with me. Must speak to your mother. Your plans will be a little changed. I'd no business leaving town, anyway."

Yet Nicolas, as he watched Mr. Ashmead hurry off, followed uncertainly by Hal, questioned if Eleanor Grantley mightn't have straightened out the office difficulties at least temporarily.

Was it possible her plunge could start such far-reaching ripples? Then he realized her desertion had reacted altogether too profoundly on himself. His morning's restlessness, his discomfort with Janet, were directly traceable to doubt of Eleanor Grantley's movements. Every member of the party save Janet, moreover, sooner or later expressed an appreciation of loss. Mrs. Ashmead had planned to use the secretary that afternoon to wade through neglected correspondence. Lady Mary sighed.

"One grows so accustomed. Aside from her use to you, Alfred, she was refreshing and helpful to have about."

It was ironical Mary should speak regretfully of her departure.

"One does miss her, doesn't one, Janet? She was so genuine, don't you think?"

"Genuine!" Janet mocked. "I'd have thought quite the opposite."

She hastened them from the subject.

Hal was most concerned and had difficulty hiding it. At luncheon he displayed an access of filial duty, announcing his intention of leaving that evening with his father for New York.

"It's not to give the law a boost," Wandel commented dryly while Nicolas and he smoked afterward.

"He's starting after Miss Grantley," Nicolas answered. "It ought to be possible to spare her that."

"Think so?" Wandel asked skeptically. "You might try your hand."

"I'm afraid I'll have to, Driggs."

Wandel stared at him.

"No use asking how. And perhaps it won't be necessary. It mayn't be so simple for Hal to find her."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because," Wandel smiled, "I was at the station last night to see her off."

Nicolas sprang up and faced him.

"What! How did you know?"

"I didn't know," Wandel yawned. "It merely occurred to me after I left you in the garden that the railway station's one of the coolest places in Key West, so I drove over and enjoyed

the breezes. You can fancy my surprise when Miss Grantley tore up at the last minute in a cab, carrying only a handbag."

Nicolas blamed himself for his lack of foresight.

"You were the sensible one, Driggs. Of course you spoke to her?"

Wandel smiled sheepishly.

"You might put it that way."

"You mean," Nicolas hazarded, "she wouldn't speak to you."

"Only," Wandel answered, "to say if I really wanted to make amends, I'd keep quiet and not raise a rumpus."

"You didn't let her go on that?"

Wandel shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course I begged her to do nothing in a rush. I asked her where she was going."

"What did she tell you?"

"She was most polite about it, Nick; but the purport of her answer was it was none of my business, or yours, or any one's else. Under the circumstances, there seemed nothing to say but good-bye."

"You ought to have kept in touch with her," Nicolas charged him.

Wandel laughed.

"I wasn't capable, my Nicolas, of hanging to her arm after Hal's fashion. I haven't gone quite so far as that on the road to universal brotherhood, although I'll grant you John and our Hal are as alike as twins."

He hesitated. His voice was perfectly serious.

"After all, Nick, I'm not so sure I'm not their remote relation."

Nicolas stared at him.

"What are you aiming at, little man?"

"I, really," Wandel answered, "can think of only one way to keep Miss Grantley out of hot water. If a nice chap should marry her——"

Nicolas grasped Wandel's shoulders.

"It's rotten taste to joke——"

"But I'm perfectly in earnest, my friend."

"What kind of a man? John?"

"I said a nice chap," Wandel drawled. "An exceptionally nice chap might do a lot worse. Don't glare at me, Nick. It's really remorse. I've felt a rotten snob since I stabbed her with that sharp stuff last night."

He freed himself, rose, thrust his hands in his pockets.

"But, Driggs! I don't see——"

"No?" Wandel asked coolly. "Unfortunately I've no cure for blindness."

Nicolas, his pulse too fast, his eyes too wide, watched Wandel walk slowly away.

Nicolas tried to banish Wandel's nonsense, as he labelled it, yet it lingered, suggesting irritating if incredible chances. It wasn't until evening that it was routed by a more immediate problem. He had told Wandel it ought to be possible to save Eleanor Grantley from Hal's pursuit. At the station, as Mr. Ashmead and Hal were about to board their train, he used his one weapon. He drew Hal aside and indicated Mary who had come down with the rest for the leave-taking.

"Have you told her what you tried to do last night?"

Hal fidgeted.

"By gad, Nick! How could a man? It's too close."

"It's got to be done," Nicolas said. "Meantime, what are you up to?"

"Running away for a breathing spell," Hal answered.

"Until you've told Mary," Nicolas said, "you can't decently run after any one else. You quite understand that?"

"Are you threatening?" Hal asked sullenly.

"Trying my best," Nicolas answered. "Mary must be told. Miss Grantley must be allowed to go in peace. I believe your mother plans to leave here to-morrow noon and get us home in a week or ten days. By then you'll have to find out how to tell Mary, or someone will do it for you. Meantime, if you've any logic left, you'll keep away from Miss Grantley."

Hal answered hotly, his face grimacing:

"One might think you, yourself——"

"That'll do," Nicolas interrupted. "You don't strengthen your case by making yourself ridiculous. The point is Mary and you are through."

"I suppose so," Hal muttered. "Gad! What an ass I've been! Let it rest till you reach town, then we'll see. Good-bye."

Unexpectedly he offered his hand. Nicolas smiled a refusal but Hal reached and caught his hand from his side.

"I'm hanged," he said, "if I'll be exiled by your upright soul. I'd give a lot to know what you'd have done in my place, Sir Galahad."

"Oughtn't to be hard to fancy," Nicolas answered.

"Maybe," Hal said under his breath, "it isn't so precious hard as you think."

Janet's parting with Hal was cloaked by sarcasm. It recalled her attitude when she had learned of Miss Grantley's flight. Certainly her glance was too sharp not to have seen something of the facts. A moment alone with her the next afternoon on the observation platform of the private car tempted Nicolas to sound her knowledge, hoping, perhaps, to win an ally.

"What do you fancy's wrong with Hal, Janet?"

There was no doubt; he had set her wide awake. Her attempted indifference was too palpably a screen.

"What should be wrong with him?"

"This sudden devotion to duty," he smiled, "deserting Mary on a moment's notice, his manner yesterday. You'll admit it was a trifle feverish."

Her voice was panicky.

"Why," she asked, "concern yourself with Hal?"

"Didn't you ask me to, last Christmas holidays—the afternoon I reached Hill's End?"

"But that was ages ago, Nick. There's no longer the occasion, since——"

"Since he's hooked up with Mary?" he interrupted. "That's exactly what makes the occasion. Because I wonder if he ought to have hooked up with her; if he really cares for her."

All the factitious radiance had fled Janet's face, leaving a calculated belligerency.

"You think he neglected her on the boat?" she cried.

"You admit he was neglectful," he caught her up.

"I know what worries you," she announced coolly. "He did go out of his way to be decent to Father's secretary, but everyone urged him to—even Mary."

Nicolas had got what he wanted. Janet's eyes all along had been partly open. She hurried ahead, as if alarmed by his silence.

"Father never ought to have brought her. You wondered the other night why I didn't care to have her about. Now you know. She's designing. And dangerous."

Nicolas managed a laugh, protecting Eleanor Grantley as he could.

"Can you picture a designing woman rushing off without a word to the object of her designs?"

"Proving, then, there's nothing in it," she fought. "Or if he's been coquetting with a stenographer, does that make him unfit to marry your cousin? My dear fiancé, remember we live in the twentieth century. If that sort of thing were an obstacle there'd be precious few marriages, at least among nice people. Have I ever made you fidget about your past?"

The train rumbled over one of the long viaducts tying the keys together, giving the passenger an illusion of giddy, unsupported flight above the water. Nicolas winced, conceiving his own position as a perilous and unsuccessful swaying from an immersion in the troubled floods of family dissension.

"Have I ever given you cause to worry much about my past?" he asked. "I merely point out what you've seen yourself, that Hal's getting his past and his present a bit confused. It isn't fair to anybody. One thinks he might explain it to Mary."

"What a fastidious Nick!" she laughed uncomfortably. "I've never thought of you as a moral censor."

"Never was one," he laughed back, "until you appointed me."

"And what does it mean?" she asked angrily. "That you'll give Mary your moral windmills to shy at?"

His answer was serious and concise.

"I hope it won't be necessary."

Her mood altered, assuming a patently false good humour.

"My Nick! Did you ever hear of a dreadfully smashed-up tribe called interferers? Mary's your cousin, I know; and Hal's my brother. All the more reason for avoiding loving fingernails and fists. Honestly, dear boy, they wouldn't thank us. I don't want to be clawed myself; and I won't have you getting hurt. So promise you'll leave Mary and Hal to fight their own battles."

Nicolas stared at her, surprised, shocked. She had propelled him farther away than he had been since the evening of their engagement; had filled him with an active distaste. From her cynical defense of Hal it was plain she had used her eyes more usefully than Nicolas had thought; yet she hadn't witnessed the one thoroughly expository picture at the church, which he couldn't paint for her since Mary and Hal weren't the only ones it implicated. He wouldn't promise. He found it simpler than at Hill's End to elude her demands.

"Let's see," he compromised, "what turns up. After all, it's Hal's move."

She sat back in her chair, resuming her everyday garment of brilliant vivacity.

"Here comes Driggs. We can talk of something less harrowing."

But Nicolas was in no mood for chatter. He had placed the entering wedge; Janet knew what to expect, but her failure to press her questions startled him, outlining as it did the broad knowledge she had probably all along possessed.

During the stops at Miami and Palm Beach and the long ride home Nicolas watched Mary without being able to hazard the extent of her suspicions or whether she had any at all. She was quiet, but then Mary had been that ever since her arrival in America. Janet didn't call the subject to life again, and Nicolas couldn't very well. Each day of the journey lengthened for him. He wanted to be back in New York. He wanted to see Hal. He wanted to learn what had happened to Eleanor Grant-

ley, to find out how far her light had diminished on her orbit back to empty space. And during the entire journey Wandel annoyed him by harping on the sense of obligation from which he suffered.

"I can't help fearing," he would say, "my pretty compliments at the church may have had something to do with her running off."

"I've rarely known your conscience to hurt you, Driggs."

Wandel's smile had never been so irritating as it was these days.

"How could it, since I've just discovered I have one."

And the evening after their return home Wandel came bustling up at the club.

"I've been to a self-made man," he said. "You know George Morton—just the one to understand. Told him the whole story, disguising identities, of course. What do you think he said?"

"Not the slightest idea."

Wandel laughed.

"He said, 'Why don't you marry her yourself, little man?'"

Wandel seemed intrigued rather than startled by the advice.

"What one would expect from a self-made man," Nicolas sneered. "Since a lot of forbears had the job of making you, I daresay you got a shock."

Wandel didn't trouble to answer. He looked thoughtfully from the window. He had, indeed, the air of one who has applied to an oracle and broods over important auguries. Nicolas couldn't guess how serious he was. He only knew from past experiences that Wandel didn't often speak without a definite purpose. Why should he make Nicolas Aldrich uncomfortable? Why should he increase his anxiety to learn what Hal had been up to? Why should he stimulate his troublesome desire to trace Eleanor Grantley and find out if all was well with her?

Nicolas suspected that Hal was avoiding him, for he wasn't in his accustomed corner at the club; nor, when Nicolas had called at Ashmead and Warden's that morning, had he been at his desk—a futile enough dodging that failed sooner than Nicolas had

hoped, for Hal was at the opera that night in a box lent Lady Mary. Between the acts Nicolas caught him in the promenade.

"Where do you hurry?" he asked. "Let's gossip."

Hal fidgeted, sought plainly to get away.

"No use," Nicolas held him. "It's an interview we promised each other at Key West."

The hunger in Hal's haggard face must have been shaped by denial. Either he had accepted Nicolas's threat and hadn't tried to locate Eleanor Grantley, or else his attempt had failed.

"Hanged sight better let it rest awhile," he muttered.

"We agreed," Nicolas reminded him, "to let it rest until I got to town. I'm here. It can't sleep any longer."

"Gad! I wish you could understand!" Hal burst out.

"Sorry I can't," Nicolas answered. "I gather you dined with Mary to-night?"

Hal nodded.

"Did you take the chance," Nicolas asked, "to tell her you'd tried to sell her out?"

"Wasn't any chance," Hal mumbled. "Anyway, first of all I'm trying to straighten things in my own mind."

"Don't wonder you find it difficult," Nicolas said.

He shrank from Hal's touch on his elbow.

"Don't judge too harshly, Nick. For a little while put up your bludgeons, you and Driggs."

Nicolas started.

"You mean Driggs has been at you since he got back last night?"

Hal jerked an assent.

"Takes a dashed fatherly interest all at once in the young lady. And see here. I thought I'd asked the two of you to keep your mouths shut. Somebody's put a bug in Janet's ear. She gave me the devil this morning."

"How much does she know?" Nicolas asked quickly.

"Hard to tell. She dodged details."

"Did she advise you," Nicolas asked, "to keep away from Miss Grantley, to play fair with Mary?"

Hal shook his head.

"No details, I said. She gave me the old scratch in a general way. Said if I didn't follow the straight and narrow I'd land in the duck pond. Said people were talking, people who could make trouble."

Nicolas smiled.

"She meant me. I'm capable of it. You can't play fast and loose with Mary because of Janet's incomplete knowledge. Perhaps if she knew what I do she'd go to Mary herself."

"Think so?" Hal jeered. "I'd like to feel as sure of you and Driggs as I do of her."

He looked at the carpet.

"Can't you see, Nick, a man can go off his head once in a way without needing a padded cell? I admit I've been off; am still a good deal wobbly. I want to be able to think straight before I play fast and loose with any of our lives. Can't you understand that? Mary and I aren't bubbling with happiness, never have been; so what's the harm in letting us drift awhile?"

Angrily Nicolas shook off the detaining hand. It was like Hal to play both ends as long as he could manage it. Hal squared his shoulders.

"That means if I don't own up right away you'll blow the whole game to the Morleys?"

Nicolas put his case quietly.

"What would you do if you were in my place, Hal?"

Hal looked at him as if not understanding.

"You mean if Janet were Mary and you were I?"

"Precisely."

Hal's dry lips shaped a shadow of their old appealing smile.

"May sound funny from me, but I believe I'd put Janet wise and try to thrash you within an inch of your life. That's just the point. I'm not making excuses. I only crave indulgence until I can get myself straight. Listen, Nick. I *am* fond of Mary."

"And Mary?" Nicolas asked incredulously. "Have you ever fancied her fond of you?"

"She's never had a chance to tell," Hal answered. "I'm only getting my chance now. It's a wrong way to arrange a

marriage. Guess that's a good deal what's been the matter with me. I agree she ought to know what a bust I've been, but I'd rather break the news myself if I can raise the nerve. That's why I ask you not to put your oar in yet. Keep it dry for a few days more, Nick."

"And while you bargain for time," Nicolas charged him, "you're seeing what can be done with Miss Grantley."

Hal raised a dissenting hand.

"It's what I chased away from Key West for," he admitted, "and it isn't your threat that's kept me off it. It's only what I tell you. I've been trying to straighten myself out. I give you my word, Nick, I haven't seen Miss Grantley, heard of her, or communicated with her in any way. It's been hard. It's what I want time for; to see if I can keep it up."

Nicolas couldn't avoid the truth in the anxious eyes. He nodded.

"No pleasant prospect for me, anyway," he agreed. "But it can't go over long. You understand that?"

Hal relaxed.

"Quite. Only a few days."

As they walked back to the box Nicolas expressed the doubt that had long been in his mind.

"One wonders if Mary sees as little as she seems to."

Hal's reply conveyed a genuine alarm.

"I hope so. I pray she's seen nothing at all."

In the box Nicolas, as the lights went down, took a chair between his mother and Mary. He avoided his mother's anxious glance. Her worried contemplation last night and to-day had told him she had read his final acceptance of her fear. How right she had been from the start! For he knew now he could never make it up to Janet. His last hope had died that afternoon on the private car when she had let him see that love, or even the broadest moral standards, had no share in her vision of marriage; yet the arrangement between them persisted. His future was dependent on her precisely as Hal's sooner or later must rest with Mary. The thought made him draw away from

fingers that groped for his, for he fancied Janet, who sat in front, had reached back. Then he realized it was Mary who had found his hand and clung to it. The colours and sounds of the stage receded as he bent close to her.

"What is it, Mary? You're not happy."

"How can one be," she whispered, "when one doesn't know whether or not to drift?"

Perhaps, after all, she had seen more than any of them had suspected.

"Are you speaking of Hal?"

"Of my pride," she answered. "Strangely enough, I have some. And Mother. I shrink from making her miserable."

"What do you know, Mary?" he asked.

"Nothing," she whispered. "That's what makes me unhappy. That's what's unbearable. I don't even know what I'm talking about. You mustn't think of it, Nick. It's only because this opera's so tiresome. Let my hand go."

Mrs. Aldrich's glance lost little for all its immobility. When he said good-night to his mother at home Nicolas gathered that she, too, had observed Mary's indecision.

"Why," she asked, sighing, "have our children chosen in just this way? I seem to see entanglements rather than engagements, yet your Aunt Mary is the peacefulest woman imaginable. How I envy her!"

Nicolas reproached her impatiently.

"You're fanciful, Mother. What other arrangement could you have hoped for?"

At first Mrs. Aldrich looked at him without answering, then she turned away, speaking in a low, regretful tone.

"No harm talking of it now. I never could have otherwise. I know Mary and you are cousins, but you've both been so dear to me. If there'd been no question of money! And that really oughtn't to count."

Nicolas looked at her, wide eyed. Had she dreamed of that? Did she still hope the situation might resolve itself so?

"Too late to think of, Mother," he muttered.

She pressed his hand. Again she sighed. Her voice was discouraged.

"I'm afraid you're right, my boy. I suppose it is too late."

Nicolas hurried early next morning to the studio, and for an hour sat at his desk, cancelling appointments for the next few days. Now that he was back the prospect of resuming work was unexpectedly irksome. His restlessness had grown with the knowledge that even Hal had no idea of Eleanor Grantley's whereabouts. What could he do about it? He had no more right than Hal to go trotting after her, interfering, offering assistance that wasn't wanted no matter how much it might be needed. Yet was it just for either Wandel or him to let her suffer for her sacrifice?

He started up at a ringing at the door. Who the deuce could that be?

He opened, and drew back with an exclamation from the mummy-like face and the gaily-tailored figure of Beau Ashmead. What could the sharp old man want here? Perhaps Janet had sent him to scold her fiancé for his increasing coldness; to demand an explanation.

"I hardly expected you, sir."

Beau Ashmead walked in, twirling his cane.

"Heard you were back," he rattled, "and it seemed to me I might have a useful five minutes with you."

"What about, sir?"

Nicolas closed the door and waited, embarrassed but not afraid. Beau Ashmead stated his errand eagerly, and it didn't concern Janet.

"Where's that Grantley gel, Nick?"

At the stark, unanticipated inquiry Nicolas failed to hide his confusion. He had no more than time to signal ignorance before the second question rattled its accusation.

"What did you all do to her in Florida?"

As he lighted a cigarette Nicolas's fingers shook. He noticed that Beau Ashmead's hands, when the old man followed his example, were quite steady.

"Tongue-tied, Nick? I see you know. Quit your squirming."

"What makes you come to me?" Nicolas asked.

Beau Ashmead grinned uneasily.

"Weren't you along? Must have seen most of what went on. Maybe without having been there I can guess some of it myself. I've had my eye on Hal since he got back ahead of the rest of you. Maybe he's convalescing from yellow fever or malaria, but it looks like another disease; and Alfred told me last night that that red-headed gel ran away without seeing a soul or leaving an excuse that would take anybody but Alfred in. Can't blame me for putting two and two together, Nick."

"Can't blame you, though I don't quite see where it gets you," Nicolas sparred.

The dry voice thinned to a tone of steely sarcasm.

"Innocent as ever! Remember you've come back to Yankee-land, Nick. I'm quick enough to know you've had your eye on that gel for a long time."

Nicolas realized that he flushed, but before he could find an answer Beau Ashmead rattled on insinuatingly.

"Of course wanting to paint her picture or something, eh? And why shouldn't you have your eye on her, 'cause once didn't I ask you to? Just come to find out what your eye saw, Nick."

Nicolas felt his back against a wall and tried to edge from the harassed position.

"Nothing that I care to speak about, sir."

"You know where she is?"

"I've no more idea," Nicolas answered, "where she went than you or the man in the moon."

Beau Ashmead was nearer open rage than Nicolas had ever known him. He thrust his wrinkled face close. He shook his cane in a tense fist.

"Where would she go? Why should she dash off at all? Has any harm come to that gel?"

He lowered his cane and leant heavily on it, his hands at last sufficiently unsteady.

"You answer! Has any harm come to her through Hal?"

Nicolas glanced down.

"Certainly not in the sense you fear, sir."

Beau Ashmead relaxed, but his voice remained harsh and angry.

"I'll wager that's not his fault. I knew he was to blame somewhere."

He moved back, mouthing a romantic regret.

"If she'd been of my day the whole world could have gone to the devil, but Hal would have had her for a grandmother. What's come over young men? Whimpering puppies that try to use their teeth in the dark!"

Nicolas interposed. It was a relief to bring something of the truth to Hal's defense.

"You needn't be too hard on him from that angle."

"Go on. Talk," the old man snapped. "I've guessed enough, and you've admitted enough, to make you go the whole way. You mean, when he found out what she was, he did want to marry her? What happened then?"

While Nicolas hesitated the old man continued to urge him.

"What could have happened? Remember we've got Mary to think of. Aren't they still engaged?"

For Nicolas there was a grim satisfaction in tearing off, if only for a rapid moment, the stiff mask of custom.

"It's true, sir. Hal wanted to come through, because—he put it so himself—it was the only way. Miss Grantley balked at the last minute. Driggs and I were there, but Mary doesn't know. I've told Hal she must."

Beau Ashmead sat down. In the merciless light he appeared suddenly collapsed—as ancient as his years. Nicolas fancied him seeking far in the past for fundamental faults in his fantastic structure of success. Clearly he tried to explain to himself this early decay, this threatened crumbling into moral rubbish of all his vast material building.

"It must go back to me," he mumbled. "It must be my fault. How could I let my flesh and blood get these weak, vicious ideas?"

Even in his shame he found a certain satisfaction that a

woman whose beginnings were comparable with his own had displayed a finer ethical sense than his carefully bred grandson.

"Good girl not to have him!" he muttered. "In her place, rather than marry that way, I'd have gone into the streets."

He glanced quickly up, frightened.

"How the deuce do we know where she's gone? See here. We've got to find her before too much damage's done. Hal isn't solvent. I'll pay his bill. I couldn't go to my grave with an Ashmead owing such a debt as that."

He clutched eagerly at Nicolas's shoulder.

"Won't hire detectives. Wouldn't be fair to her. Besides, they're not much use except to raise a racket. You find her for me like a good boy, Nick."

Nicolas glanced away. It was what he had all along wanted to do, and now he had his excuse and a sufficient authority.

"It oughtn't to be very difficult," he said.

The old man rushed on with a pitiful anxiety:

"You've got an idea where she is, now, Nick, haven't you?"

Nicolas shook his head.

"None. But one can eliminate. I've a feeling she wouldn't take another office job—at least, about New York. She'd scarcely bother her parents. There's the stage. It seems to me, after all, a girl with her beauty might let the reaction drive her into the theatre although she loathed it."

"Maybe you're right, Nick. In that case she ought to be easy to find. Promise me you'll write as soon as you spot her. Wish I were your age. I'd do my own tracking."

"I expect to find her," Nicolas said, "and I'll wire as soon as I do."

He shifted his position uncomfortably. He tried to read the wrinkled, nervous countenance.

"Must say I don't see, sir, just why you've come to me."

"No?" Beau Ashmead said. "That's not of much consequence."

He paused at the head of the stairs, and commenced to chuckle on a high and disagreeable note. Nicolas started, saw that the ancestor laughed bitterly at himself.

"God knows I'm no Napoleon, Nick," the cracked voice got out, "but I'm understanding how it feels to found a dynasty. By the way, aren't you supposed to be getting married pretty soon to one of my princelings?"

Nicolas snapped the mask in place.

"Might ask Janet about that."

Beau Ashmead's sardonic mirth continued.

"Did, last night. She said it was understood all along it would be in a couple months. Says she's working her head off on that basis. But I'm wasting your time, because you must know all about it. By-by."

After closing the door Nicolas leant for a moment against the wall, striving to appreciate the changes in his nature that the old man's frank visit had determined. He had an impression of heavy veils having been torn from his eyes, exposing a fresh landscape in which details were as yet blurred by the blinding light.

Some, however, he could make out. The innuendoes of Janet's grandfather had slipped by without wounding; he didn't care how much Beau Ashmead guessed of the diminution of his interest in Janet. It was the hint of her selfish, headstrong determination that had struck and hurt. He realized now how strongly he had hoped the strain between Janet and him that had increased since the Southern cruise would impress her with their mistake; yet her grandfather pictured her preparing as a matter of course for a marriage Nicolas felt in honour bound to see through.

More blurred in his mind was the reason for his too-anxious perception of Janet's faults; his over-eager desire to find Eleanor Grantley and put her in the way of Beau Ashmead's atonement. At least it was more useful to commence his task than to stand there seeking paths through a strange, ill-defined country. He put on his hat and coat. He set forth.

As a start, in order to leave no stone unturned, he called at Mr. Grantley's office. The failure's prosperous appearance remained; but his face was grayer, and his childlike eyes had lost most of their hitherto enduring hope. His daughter was

to blame. At Nicolas's first question he sprang from his chair, outpouring frightened questions of his own about the Southern trip.

"But surely," Nicolas interposed, "you've heard something from Miss Grantley."

"Naturally," Mr. Grantley answered, "or I'd have gone to the police. Can't do that now. You know Eleanor. You can guess how she'd take it if I interfered. Always she must have her own way."

"How did you hear?" Nicolas asked. "A letter?"

Mr. Grantley nodded.

"When did it come? Where was it postmarked?" Nicolas asked.

"Two days ago," Mr. Grantley said. "It was evidently mailed on a Pennsylvania railroad train."

"Would you mind telling me——"

"Just said," Mr. Grantley answered in a discouraged voice, "she'd left Ashmead and Warden and was taking a job out of town. She would let us know all about it as soon as she was settled; and we weren't to worry, and were to know nothing if people came asking. We don't know anything, and how can we help worrying when people do come asking?"

"Who's been?" Nicolas asked.

Mr. Grantley waved his hand in a momentary appreciation of his daughter's importance.

"Old Mr. Ashmead was here early this morning, and several people have been from Ashmead and Warden's, and last evening Mr. Wandel came to the apartment——"

"What did he have to say?" Nicolas broke in uneasily.

"Just wanted to know, the way you all do, what's become of Eleanor. It frightens me, Mr. Aldrich, not to be able to tell, and it makes me wonder you should all be so interested in her whereabouts."

"Mr. Ashmead," Nicolas replied vaguely, "had learned to depend on her. He would like to have her back."

"But," Mr. Grantley insisted suspiciously, "that wouldn't account for Mr. Wandel."

Nicolas had no answer, for it was beyond him, too, to explain Wandel's starting a search Nicolas had attempted to forego. He tore himself from Mr. Grantley's anxieties, and hurried in a cab to the West Side boarding house. From the matron he learned that Eleanor Grantley had come directly from Key West to New York, had spent three nights at the boarding house, then had given up her room and driven away with all her luggage in a cab.

"Did she leave a forwarding address?" Nicolas asked.

The matron shook her head.

"I thought it odd," she said suspiciously, "and asked her if she didn't care to give me one. She said it wasn't worth while, because she didn't expect anything."

"Perhaps," Nicolas suggested, "you heard her tell the driver where to take her."

"Why should I have?" the woman replied testily. "I didn't follow her down the steps to the sidewalk."

The suspicion in her face had increased. Her eyes, studying Nicolas, narrowed.

"I'd always thought her an extremely nice girl. If she's done anything out of the way——"

"Nonsense!" Nicolas cried. "Why should you dream of that?"

"Because," she answered slowly, "you're not the first person who's been here about her."

Her garrulousness was easily stimulated, and he recognized in her "good-looking, pleasant-faced, smallish man," Driggs Wandel. Nicolas resented Driggs's interference. What did he want of Eleanor Grantley? He'd apologized once for his injustice. What was back of all his nonsense about some decent chap marrying her? It was useless to worry about that until one or the other had found the girl.

He clung to his thought that the shock had altered her entire ambition. The stage was certainly a logical lure. There was no point bothering Clarice, for, if she wanted to avoid Hal, Eleanor Grantley would keep away from the statuesque actress. Instead she would probably have applied

at an agency. Sadie Bamber, from her position in the chorus, was readily accessible to professional gossip. She would have the run of the agencies; and Eleanor Grantley's appearance was too pronounced for her passage through any one of them not to have been remarked.

The musical comedy in which Clarice and the Bamber girl had shouted and spun had recently closed its New York engagement, but Nicolas went to the office of the producers and learned the piece was starting its out-of-town run in Philadelphia that evening. Although there had been many changes in the cast Miss Sadie Bamber remained. New girls had joined the company in Philadelphia, but there was no record of their names here.

A talk with Sadie Bamber was worth the brief trip; so, after a bite of luncheon, Nicolas hurried home to pack a bag. His mother and father were out, and he left word with Johnson that he was running over to Philadelphia, probably for the night. As Nicolas was starting up the stairs Johnson took a letter from the hall table and handed it to him.

"All there was in the noon mail, sir."

Nicolas glanced indifferently at unfamiliar writing. In his room without any interest he tore the envelope open. Then his eyes widened. He sat down abruptly. A heavy doubt increasing upon him, he read again and again the brief message, unsigned, but only too clearly written by Eleanor Grantley.

"If you still wish to, Mr. Aldrich, I'm quite willing to let you paint me some day. There's no reason now why you shouldn't; only I would rather not try to pose as a saint."

X

THE DAZZLING LANDSCAPE

WHILE he packed, on his way to the station, in the train, Nicolas brooded over Eleanor Grantley's singular letter. From the first he had no doubt her yielding was designed to convey a great deal more than compliance with his request that she let him know if ever she should change her mind. "Not as a saint" manifestly indicated that she had lowered herself in her own esteem. It was as if she sought to display to him the furling of her proud, undecipherable banners. The revolution, then, had been drastic enough to make her turning to the stage natural, nearly inevitable. The insufficient secrecy she had attempted, moreover, wouldn't let him take her note literally; for, in addition to being unsigned, the sheet had no sender's address. The postmark, however, was illuminating. It encouraged Nicolas, promised him he was already on the threshold of success; for the letter had been posted in Philadelphia.

Those few lines in her hand, carried in his pocket, aroused a flushed curiosity as to why he should respond to them so understandingly; yet no man, he told himself, could crush sympathy under the circumstances. Beau Ashmead had praised her for refusing to marry Hal. It must have been as plain to her as it had been to Wandel, Nicolas, and the old man that Hal had agreed only because he could have her in no other way. Perhaps it was her realization of the degrading fact that had made her turn at the church, that had let her abase herself in her significant letter.

It was late afternoon when Nicolas walked to the theatre, guided by plentiful billboards and window displays. The guardian of the stage door informed him that a last-minute rehearsal

dragged to a close. He waited, therefore, in the wings, his mood responding more and more depressingly to the unrepresentable reverse of the theatre's glowing setting. The chanting, dog-weary voices of the chorus sickened him. A helpless resentment was born of the director's vituperative bellowings. He endeavoured to peer through interstices of the scenery, and failed. His warm hope of finding Eleanor Grantley here cooled. She couldn't be caught in such fatiguing, virulent drudgery. It was unreasonable to place her, even in his imagination, among such tawdriness, such verbal turbulence, this pervading sex-suggestiveness.

From the front of the house he heard the director volley across the footlights on good-natured colloquialisms a dismissal and a warning that there would be little more than time for a change and a bite to eat before first call. As the flock poured into the obscurity of the wings he stepped aside, his eyes intent on the huddled animal mass. Removed from the saving glare of the stage, the chorus became outworn stuffs, faded spangles, audacious flesh. His interest continued to diminish; the fancy of Eleanor Grantley as a unit of the herd was so preposterous. Then for the second time in the hidden places of a theatre he responded to the individual note. There shuffled the Bamber girl, her cherubic countenance ravaged by a bestial exhaustion. She came on, fluffy head down, arms hanging listlessly, bare round legs without rhythm.

"Yvonne!" he said under his breath.

Her head snapped up, the painted face brightened, the spring returned to her limbs.

"Mr. Aldrich! Who'd 'a' thought a seeing you here. Johnny stuff?"

He drew her out of the rabble, shaking his head.

"I came to look for you, and, maybe, Clarice."

"Won't find Clarice with these stick-dodgers," she said scornfully. "She's too haughty to play even the subway circuit if there's anything else doing. Her luck! Rehearsing in New York with a new show. Gee! How I wish I was back in that wicked hamlet! What you want of her?"

"I really came to talk with you, Yvonne," he said.

Her white teeth gleamed.

"I know you. You ain't married yet, are you? Clarice gets you swells right."

"I'm only seeking information," he smiled.

She pouted.

"Say, it wouldn't hurt to string a fella along for a minute. Fire away. I'm a regular encyclopædia."

"Would you mind," he asked contritely, "snatching a bite with me before your call?"

Her gaiety returned.

"All sentiment aside, Mr. Aldrich, there are mighty few live parties in this burg. You bet! Wait till I shake my royal robes."

She started to run for the iron stairs, but he detained her. The remembrance of all he had seen since entering this building made him shrink from waiting to ask the questions that had brought him.

"By the way, Yvonne, I'm told there are new girls in the company."

"Sure. We all aren't so bad we have to get our feet dusty."

"How many?"

"Maybe half a dozen."

"Any beginners?"

"I don't know," she answered impatiently, "but you can't go wrong if you gamble on it."

"Happen to know the new names?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I said I was an encyclopædia, not a directory."

He tried to keep the eagerness from his voice, and he glanced around, as if to make certain no one save his companion should hear him use that name here.

"You haven't by any chance run across a girl named Grantley, Eleanor Grantley?"

Again she was of no help.

"Doesn't sound fancy enough for this bunch. What do you want her for? Maybe somebody left her a fortune?"

"Not so far from the mark," he equivocated. "Run along. I'll wait for you here."

She dashed away, her youth and agility renewed. Nicolas paced nervously up and down, scarcely relieved by the Bamber girl's ignorance. Over dinner he would arrange with her to comb the agencies, but his former confidence that he would find Eleanor Grantley with the company slipped stealthily back, persisted, filled him with a fancy of sensing delicately her nearness. She might be close, for that matter, since she could be trusted not to use her own name, and since numbers of the principals and chorus had undoubtedly left the stage for their dressing-rooms through the opposite wings. He could easily test his fear, because there was only the one stage door, which he watched. Sooner or later every member of the company must pass before his eyes.

With an increasing anxiety he continued his pacing, glancing up at each tripping of high heels on iron treads. Flashily gowned girls with expensive-appearing hats and furs clattered down, passed him, and slipped into the alley. Some minced from the other side of the stage now, the direction from which she would come if she were in the building at all.

He was at the scenery end of his impatient roving, and partially concealed, when with a momentarily more certain recognition he received the proof that his instinct had all along been right. From the shadows of the backpiece he watched advancing toward the door a taller, slenderer, quieter-dressed young woman; a tired and a furtive figure.

An electric bulb glinted on ruddy hair.

Without calculation Nicolas sprang out, offering his hand.

"It's Miss Grantley!"

The pallid, oval face turned. Her inscrutable eyes stared back at him a surprised inquiry. Without quickening her step, as though all her motions were irresistibly predetermined, she walked on to the door and disappeared in the alley.

For a minute Nicolas was caught in the bonds of surprise and anger. After sending that illuminating note she had passed

him without the least wavering of recognition. It was the significance of his having seen her here at all that released him and sent him hurrying after. It meant she was a part of this tinsel world. Undoubtedly her rudeness had been a calculated warning that she'd tolerate no interference from him or his friends. Hotly he told himself he'd convince her; he possessed the right to interfere now.

The alley was empty. Once out of sight she must have run, for when he reached the street he saw a cab hastening away. By the time he had found another the car carrying Eleanor Grantley had disappeared.

Such a flight was childish, for she would have to come back to the theatre for the evening performance, and she must know he would be waiting. And he would make her listen to him. He overcame his spurious niceties. He would tell Eleanor Grantley precisely what she was letting herself in for, what people would say. He would demand her reasons for so complete a mental and moral revolution. He would endeavour to tear from her at last the real object of her quest, and her excuse for completely abandoning it. Yet Beau Ashmead could talk to her more usefully. When he'd got Sadie Bamber he'd fulfil his promise and wire the old man.

As he walked back along the alley he avoided the saffron circles splashed beneath occasional electric globes. He felt himself already far in the new country, which was as remote from his normal boundaries as the ugly, ambushed fields of war had been. Here as there one went with studied stealth, encouraged fear and cunning, neglected wholly the old graceful and unreal background. Here as in battle one responded to the need of a brutal overcoming of opposition; most of all, to the paramount desire for self-preservation. Without quite understanding how, he knew that elements essentially savage had slipped past encumbering custom to fill his brain. That was why he avoided the dazzling light with the stealth of a primæval hunter. That was why there was room in his mind for no more than the next few hours of tracking. Beyond that the future must arrange itself.

His thoughts paused. Hadn't Hal tried to excuse himself

through an identical narrow pressure before the church in Key West?

He met Sadie Bamber at the stage door.

"Want to give me gray hair, Mr. Aldrich? Thought you'd slipped a fella."

He took her to a restaurant overdressed in gilt and over-lighted. Before going to the table he scribbled a telegram to Beau Ashmead, giving the name of the theatre and the company. He was certain the old man would hurry over, but he couldn't arrive in time to keep Eleanor Grantley from exposing herself in faded and insufficient grandeur. That duty was forced by circumstance on Nicolas Aldrich.

In the crowded dining-room his too-long-practised mental habits resumed control. Automatically he banked the fires of his determination. He tried to chat easily with the animated girl opposite.

"Who you wire?" she was asking.

"Business," he teased her.

"Awful old stuff to pull," she protested. "Been my experience there isn't any such thing."

"In this case there is," he said. "Let's talk about it."

His errand with the chorus girl had altered; had become more exciting, more compelling.

"I told you I was looking for someone."

"To give a fortune to," she jeered.

"Perhaps not so important as that. You know, I think she *is* one of your newcomers. How about Grand?"

The Bamber girl honestly pondered. She shook her head.

"We got a lot of baby grands."

"Serious!" he warned her. "This girl has really extraordinary red hair. You'd scarcely miss it——"

Her face lightened.

"Why couldn't you say so in the first place? I know. Green as the murry, murry springtime but just as pretty, too. She's popular with the other twinkle-toes, don't you guess?"

For a time, while she studied him suspiciously, she neglected her hurriedly ordered meal.

"I'm beginning to catch you now, Mr. Aldrich. Ever since she showed up the other day I've risked brain fever trying to think where I'd seen her before. I'm on. She's the girl Hal and Clarice took to the Pantheon that night last winter when you came tearing after them."

"That's the one, Yvonne. When did she report?"

She made a gesture of amused discouragement.

"I give you up, Mr. Aldrich. I don't mind a thing you say. And a fella does cling to a meal ticket. She joined the circus last week."

"What kind of a part did they give her?" he asked.

"Not much," she said, "but good enough to make a lot of us wish we were in her shoes—or under her wig. Boss is crazy about her looks. She doesn't need a lot of experience to show that off, so he's posing her in the big tableaux."

Nicolas shrank from the bald statement.

"Got her new clothes and all that," Sadie Bamber hurried on. "And, believe me or not, Mr. Aldrich, my rags are so rotten some night they'll leave me flat."

She grinned vindictively.

"Might give the show a boost. Believe me, it's going to need one with this hick cast."

She quizzed him.

"You know, I believe you're stuck on the amateur, Mr. Aldrich."

He sipped his water, disguising with a smile a swift, unjust anger against the teasing girl. He shook his head.

"Time flies, and you're neglecting those nice things the waiter's brought."

During the few minutes of her obedience he looked at her with a meditative interest. She was right enough to tease him. In a similar situation Hal, instead of talking about another woman, would have occupied himself with the one at hand. At the thought some of Nicolas's distaste for Hal rebounded against himself, for the essential savage had got too much control tonight not to suggest primitive sedatives for an over-modern moral restlessness. He was about to spring up and rid himself

of the pretty, painted creature when she put down her fork, shot a glance at him, and spoke with an air of embarrassed contrition.

"Maybe you'd like to know that lady has too high-toned ideas for the chorus. Of course the dump isn't costly enough to break a fella, but she just has to have a sitting-room."

With an air of abstraction she turned back to her food, muttering:

"Ever see Sandal's Hotel, Mr. Aldrich? Funny, isn't it? She has the room next to mine."

He hid his embarrassment. Plainly the good-hearted girl misunderstood and tried to do him a favour. Her mistake spurred him to draw Eleanor Grantley back in time. He glanced anxiously at his watch. He wanted to keep an eye on the alley.

"In a hurry?" she mocked him. "Why don't you ask me the number of her room?"

"Because," he answered shortly, "it's quite unnecessary."

He mentioned the time, and she bowed to discipline and walked back to the theatre at his side. After he had left her at the door he paced the alley. He had to catch Eleanor Grantley now, insist on her recognition, and change her mind before the curtain should go up and the spotlights make too obvious and too easily seen her mystical beauty.

The minutes dragged by; many women hurried through the alley, but she failed to appear. With the eagerness of inexperience, she must have reported ahead of everyone. As a last resort he applied at the stage door and described Eleanor Grantley to the disapproving guardian.

"Somehow or other," he insisted, "I must see her before the performance."

The man glibly recited a rule. It was a first night, anyway, and there was riot in the air.

"Come back after the show," he advised.

Even a banknote failed to move him. He declined it with a muttered and profane denunciation of the company manager.

With nothing else left to do Nicolas went to the box office and bought a seat well back under the gallery. He waited for the lifting of the curtain with a tension that stretched from curiosity

to revolt. He couldn't delude himself. The sight of Eleanor Grantley exposed to these expectant people for the sake of her beauty would shatter into irrecoverable fragments the enticing and mystical conception that had grown in his brain more sturdily than he had realized. After that he wouldn't want to paint her, since he would be compelled to visualize her as one with Clarice and Sadie Bamber, who paraded themselves blatantly for profit before a prurient public. He tried to convince himself that the approaching revelation would be beneficial. At least it should subdue the elemental side that had made him treasure Sadie Bamber's information about the hotel, that had put him on watch in the alley, that continued to fill his brain with strange promptings.

Once he had seen her across the footlights there would be no point in going to the hotel. It would be too late. Beau Ashmead could take charge then.

He glanced hurriedly through the programme and found nothing to identify her. Her pseudonym must be one of the staggering aristocratic names in small type.

The orchestra blared the overture and the curtain rose. Even through the skilful lighting Nicolas could discern the scars of a long New York run. Players, too, in voice and gesture, confessed fatigue and a bored habitude.

Eleanor Grantley didn't appear in the opening chorus, but he remembered there would be a grouping at the close of the act where she would surely be shown off.

During the long wait, scanning tired faces, he accused himself of a too-acute sensitiveness. All these vivacious girls didn't care for Hal's sort of party. The majority of them weren't reasonably even of Sadie Bamber's sort. Unquestionably there was plenty of honest ambition hidden by the sickly glare. But such ambition was entirely alien to everything Eleanor Grantley had ever said or done. That fact made of her sharing of so artificial a light an unbelievable metamorphosis.

As the familiar scenes flashed by toward the act's close he struggled against a temptation to shirk the approaching disillusionment. It would be so simple to slip out, or to shut

his eyes and watch nothing. He had a curious, momentary impression that his mother was near by, reminding him of a duty, difficult but curative, to remain and see Eleanor Grantley stripped of her compelling mysticism. He grasped the arms of his chair, as if to hold himself to that unwelcome obligation.

Only a moment or two more now——

A drop swung up to the flies, disclosing a skilful composition of human figures. While the house broke into scattered applause Nicolas's eyes wandered among the partially draped women and across the painted faces. He sat back. His hands ceased straining at the chair arms. He lost the sensation of breathing insufficient air. More carefully he examined the individual figures. It should be impossible to miss the alluring hair, the girlish, slender lines. Before his amazed eyes the curtain fell. Several times it rose in response to the audience's approval. Eleanor Grantley wasn't in the group. At the last minute she must have funked it just as she had changed her mind on the church steps in Key West.

He went out mechanically, aware of a destination without the courage to name it; his brain dominated more than before by that hungry and exigent honest self. He hurried around to the stage door. The guardian recited the scattering gossip he had picked up during the act.

"One of the new girls threw 'em down at the last minute. Sent word she was sick. Poor little Ham! After the manager gets through with her she'll look more like a torn photograph than a living picture."

Nicolas caught Sadie Bamber running across. She stuck out her tongue.

"Hope you've got your fortune for that freshie, 'cause she's hung herself by her pretty hair. Take it from one who knows, Mr. Aldrich, the old man's redder-headed than she ever was."

But Nicolas, as he turned away, wasn't so sure. Eleanor Grantley was striking enough to win an occasional forgiveness from any showman. To-morrow she might be in the cast, but he had received a respite. There was time to argue, to plead. And each moment his destination grew clearer.

Through the voices and the sights of an extreme sophistication he welcomed the impression he had shared with Eleanor Grantley on the private car of standing in a wilderness. He started down the alley, indeed, with the motions of a dweller among natural dangers, and at the opening to the street he was grateful for that instinctive caution. He paused and drew back warily. There was no mistaking the man that stood on the fringe of the group of smokers outside the theatre entrance. John was at his self-appointed task of looking after Eleanor Grantley. It was a shock for Nicolas to find the sullen figure in Philadelphia and evidently on the same errand as himself. The man's face was puzzled as though Eleanor Grantley's absence from the tableau had hopelessly confused him. He tossed aside a half-smoked cigarette and strolled to the entrance of the theatre. Then he must have changed his mind, for he reappeared, lighted another cigarette, and walked slowly up Chestnut Street.

Nicolas watched him go, arguing that the chauffeur's movements were none of his concern; yet so long as they threatened to involve Eleanor Grantley he must take them into account. John had been clever enough to trace her to the theatre. Why wasn't he equally capable of finding her hotel?

Nicolas walked through to Walnut Street, his destination made to his reluctant conscience quite definite. Of course he was going to the hotel, and of course John, without a Sadie Bamber, wouldn't be likely to find it to-night, or to interfere with Nicolas's errand there. It was necessary he should go, because Eleanor Grantley, alarmed at his discovery of her, might be making her arrangements for another flight. From the first policeman he saw he asked the location of the building. When he reached it he found a run-down example of the cheaper apartment hotel, a place far less livable than the boarding house had been. He flung off his last restraint and crossed the street. What nonsense to have hesitated at all when Janet's grandfather had sent him!

Nicolas entered a narrow hall. Immediately inside, to the left, was the elevator shaft. A Negro boy nodded in the car.

Nicolas's heart quickened as he glanced along the hall. In the office beyond, he saw two or three unoccupied chairs. The elevator was easily accessible from the street, yet removed from the observation of the desk.

The night clerk, in fact, was posted at one side of the small room that served as lounge and office. He glanced at Nicolas inquiringly. Nicolas drew the register around and examined the record of recent arrivals. He hit on Sadie Bamber's name at once. The number of her room was two hundred and two. Quickly he sought for two hundred and one and two hundred and three. The first number didn't appear opposite the name of any arrival on that page. Two hundred and three did, assigned to Miss Alice Carter. His last doubt fled, for the name was in the hand that had written the note he had received that afternoon.

Nicolas looked at the clerk warily. The man stifled a yawn. He seemed not at all concerned.

"Mr. Aldrich to see Miss Carter."

The clerk nodded and loafed to the small switchboard.

"Hello! Hello!" Nicolas heard him grumble.

And after a moment:

"Mr. Aldrich is calling."

She was there right enough; the clerk hadn't spoken to thin air. The call had been answered. The man looked around, his face surprised and apologetic.

"Sorry, sir. Miss Carter isn't in."

"Perhaps," Nicolas suggested, "there's someone else I might speak to."

The clerk shook his head.

"No one there at all."

Nicolas hid his appreciation of the palpable falsehood.

"Have you any notion when Miss Carter's likely to return?"

"Not till late. I think she's an actress. I'll see she gets your card."

Nicolas left the card as a formality. The whole thing had been that—a reconnaissance—a necessary step as a prelude to what? The location of the elevator shaft crowded his mind.

As he went out he scarcely dared glance at it, struggled not to put into concrete form the possibility it suggested with an insidious fascination. For a moment he surrendered to his instinct of a hunter stimulated to sharper acuteness by the clumsy effort of his game to escape him. He could trap her by using the convenient elevator and slipping up unannounced. He got hold of himself. He walked away from the hotel, clinging to the thought of another conventional attempt to communicate with her through the clerk.

He found himself in unfrequented streets. As he entered a small park a misty rain commenced to fall. The place was quite unoccupied. The few lamps left corners as impulsively shadowed as the arbour where he had first glimpsed Eleanor Grantley. He sat on a bench, clasped his hands, and stared at the dreary houses opposite. In this depressing place he faced nakedly the sweeping alteration he had suffered.

Was his driving desire to be accounted for by the need of helping Eleanor Grantley, even of saving her from what he believed an irreparable mistake? The new Nicolas Aldrich, whom the old appraised, smiled skeptically.

His clasped hands tightened. Abruptly his eyes took in the details of his surroundings. The aspect of the houses, because of their adherence to a pattern, had an ascetic severity that drew from his unwilling brain his confession. Charity could wait. The truth was he wanted to see Eleanor Grantley; had hungered to do it since her flight from Key West. The fact of her proximity lashed him toward her to-night; not for her sake, for his own entirely.

He sprang to his feet. Could that be the truth? He bowed confusedly to the incredible, the destructive fact. He wanted a glimpse of her oval face, the glint of light on her hair. He knew he must seek again in the depths of her eyes the answers to the riddles she had always posed. More than anything else he desired the touch of her slender and reluctant fingers; craved to experience again the warmth their cold response had sent along his nerves that night at Key West.

He walked rapidly away, in flight from this irrepressible self.

Desperately he called on his memory of Janet; but at the moment he needed her most she failed him. She slipped into his mind no more than a figure of serene and open selfishness, whose beauty was marred by its very obviousness, whose animation responded only to the stimulation of self-indulgence.

The new man couldn't harbour a charge of faithlessness to Janet. As long as he walked in this obscurity the fundamental value of facts controlled him. He didn't love Janet. He had never cared for her as he had been taught, through painful grades, to understand caring. For the first time he let flame in his mind the appreciation of her campaign. She had led him to the conservatory that day. She had put her hand and her lips close. She had arranged everything, as she was quietly and capably arranging the wedding she wanted and meant to have.

He paused in front of a large, abandoned dwelling house. The shutters hung awry. The verandah crumbled. The ugliness of the mansion's decay was eloquent of the quickly withering span of a man's material experience. You couldn't take chances with such swiftly vanishing opportunities. He shivered, and argued that his sudden chill had come from the wind that had sprung up with the first raindrops. He shook his head. It wouldn't do. Why, then, since he was willing to admit reality so far, couldn't he accept it wholly? Why not tell Janet, by word or letter, their affair had been from the beginning unreal? Why not point out to her that to try to infuse life into a vision so pallid would lead inevitably to abominable and degrading disappointments?

A closed car, filled with men and women in evening wraps, splashed by, swerving only in time to miss him. The conventional picture was partially restorative. He couldn't face Janet on those crude terms yet; he didn't see how he could ever get sufficiently away from his background to do it.

He thrust his hands in his overcoat pockets and walked on, trying to focus his eyes through the coloured glasses with which he had nearly always looked at the world. The truth, standing mockingly by, defeated him.

His mother had suffered because she had seen the truth at the start. That was the stupid inconsistency of habit, because his mother, more than any one else, would disapprove his following his instinct to break brutally with Janet. How much less would she understand his craving to return to the hotel, to slip up in the elevator, to force his way to a sentimental interview with Eleanor Grantley, an office girl, a member of a musical comedy chorus?

Because of his mother he must run as Eleanor Grantley had. Beau Ashmead would look after her to-morrow. He turned in the direction of Broad Street station, but the enormity of his denial slackened his steps. He continued slowly, eyes down-cast, his hands clenched in his pockets.

Drenched grass and dripping trees aroused him. He was in the little park where he had sat awhile ago. Instead of keeping his line of flight he was circling, as though drawn by a force infinitely sterner than habit, back toward the hotel. He squared his shoulders. With the shamed relief of one who casts off a repression too long endured he surrendered wholly to that force. He crossed the park and started through the sombre, nearly empty side streets for Eleanor Grantley's room.

Once or twice he glanced back uneasily, then, having seen nothing to disturb him, continued. For some time he had had this sensation of a slow, determined pursuit. It wasn't, he assured himself now, a physical trailing; rather the haunting hallucination of an idea. The sullen and threatening figure he had seen at the theatre entrance had lodged in his mind; and this impression of John lurking in his steps, or dodging behind trees, was his inborn caution trying to frighten him from an audacious plan.

Nicolas shrugged his shoulders and went faster in an effort to outrun the gaunt menace. He wouldn't be held back by a phantom. He was willing to admit Wandel's innuendo. All men were brothers to the extent of sharing an identical blind obedience to the basic laws of nature. The faster he went, however, the closer the pursuit seemed to approach. Why shouldn't that conception of John as the uncouth, the savage

factor of life, walk with him encouragingly, rather than after him as a threat?

He stopped short. Was it merely a mental apprehension, this obsession of a following danger? Wasn't there, indeed, an active man back there in the rainy night? Whether there was or not the grim accompaniment had accomplished one end. A few hours ago Nicolas Aldrich, sitting with Sadie Bamber in the restaurant, had, with a rush of distaste, prided himself on a decenter control than Hal's. After this great test in which he had failed, and had wanted to fail, did any real distinction survive? Wasn't John with his crude desires cleaner than either?

He went on, making no further attempt to obscure his wish or to hold back from its fulfilment, but after what he had seen in Key West, he couldn't treat Janet as Hal had wronged Mary. He was, however, going to see Eleanor Grantley in any way he could, avoiding the observation of a hotel clerk, bribing a sleepy elevator boy. That wasn't for charity, save to himself. His restraint was exhausted. You could call it what you pleased; he didn't dare give it a name.

From the opposite side of the street he examined the dingy façade of the hotel. It was only ten o'clock. The other girls of the company who lived there wouldn't troop back for more than an hour. He had plenty of time. On the second floor he observed one brightly lighted window. Could that be Eleanor Grantley's room? The shade was up so that he could see a considerable portion of the interior—the door opposite, the lighted table lamp, the backs of two chairs, dingy wall paper, cheap pictures. In his interest he forgot his impression of a pursuit. Would she have left that curtain up if she were really ill, if she weren't instead preparing to leave? He straightened. Her slender figure had rapidly crossed the square of the window. The light had flashed on her heavy, ruddy hair. She was there, and probably alone.

He crossed, his brain seeking means to make her forgive his intrusion. He sighed with relief. The narrow entrance hall was quite as he had found it before. It might be better to trust to the boy's sleepiness than to a bribe. As Nicolas entered the

elevator the boy started to his feet, clanging the aluminum-painted door shut. He pulled the control lever and slouched over it, apparently assuming he had a transient guest.

"Second!" Nicolas said quietly.

The car jerked to a stop, and Nicolas stepped into a long, dimly lit hall; odorous; shabby; with a red, frayed carpet. The elevator dropped whiningly out of sight. As he stood for a moment with the surreptitious uncertainty of a criminal Nicolas recalled the night he had sought Eleanor Grantley in her boarding house, and he asked himself wonderingly if even then there hadn't lurked in his brain the plenary emotion that had dared shape itself to-night, that had awakened him and brought him here.

He walked softly past scarred, imitation mahogany doors until on one he read the figures two hundred and three. He raised his hand and knocked. To his acute senses the sound seemed to break his caution into a thousand warning pieces and scatter them revealingly to every corner of the building. Eleanor Grantley's voice came to him, subdued but surprised.

"Who is there?"

He hadn't the courage to answer, since the confession of his identity might hold the door permanently closed. Her voice reached him again.

"Who is there? What is it?"

His hand started purposefully forward, but before he could touch the handle he saw the knob turn. The door swung open.

She stood to one side. Fear and anger swept the curiosity from her face; but Nicolas at first had room only for gratitude that he hadn't delayed longer than he had, for her hat and cloak lay across the table, and on the floor near by were two bags, strapped and locked.

"What do you mean, Mr. Aldrich?"

Before she could block his way he passed over the threshold, and from the room itself faced her accusing eyes. Her lips had remained parted from her first shocked demand, but she didn't speak again for a moment, as if her amazed disapproval sought a fitting and safe expression.

Her angry manner steadied him surprisingly. The mere fact of being with her gave him a temporary illusion of having anchored again among the old placid shoals of thought and action. He was thoroughly conscious of the need of preventing her mistaking his motives for those of the wanderer Hal; of convincing her that he had bowled over obstacles of custom solely in her behalf. He smiled, offering his hand.

"I'm awfully pleased to have found you, Miss Grantley."

She appeared not to see his hand. Her lips moved.

"But when you sent your name up some time ago I told the clerk particularly I would see no one."

With an effort he clung to his moorings.

"Why else should I come in this unusual fashion? I acknowledge my trespass, but let all your friends share the blame."

Her eyes blazed. She answered quickly with a warmer voice:

"My friends! That won't do. I haven't any."

It indicated the thoroughness of her surrender to failure; explained, after a fashion, her cutting of him in the theatre.

"What nonsense! I'll prove to you, Miss Grantley, how wrong you are."

"As the spokesman of my friends?" she jeered.

It was harder than he had thought to remain calmly at anchor.

"Since I'm here," he said, "ask anything you please."

For the first time her attitude altered, lost its tensility. She drew the door significantly wider.

"I'm not going——" he began.

"Of course you are. It's unheard of. But first I'll tell you I don't care for help. I won't have it. At least I'll say who is to come offering it."

He had a startled appreciation of attempting to accomplish what he had pointed out to John a man couldn't reasonably do.

"Don't make me force my services."

She nodded toward the door.

"I merely want you to leave me alone."

But he held his ground.

"What is it, Miss Grantley? Why do you try to avoid your

friends? Why did you walk past me without speaking this afternoon? Why did you refuse to see me to-night? Why, after making me come in this uncomfortable fashion, do you want me to leave without saying what I must say? Your friends can't permit such things; they're too much in your debt."

Her eyes half closed, and he realized he had blundered.

"Let us," he hurried on, "be friends for a minute."

Again he offered his hand. She drew back against the wall. Gently he touched her fingers, and more impetuously than at Key West a sensation of vertiginous heat flashed along his nerves. Her hand drew quickly away from his, slipped from the knob, and dropped at her side. With an impulsive, determined movement he closed the door. The moment was too precious not to use as far as he could. Her increased fear steadied him. He knew as thoroughly as though the darkness hadn't veiled it that an identical emotion had filled her eyes the night Wandel and he, guided by her cry, had dashed to the dark end of the pond. Before he could reassure her she turned and walked swiftly, gracefully, threateningly, toward the telephone. He experienced a flashing instinct to spring after her and imprison her in his arms. Since force wouldn't serve he sought for diplomacy.

"Wait, Miss Grantley! Don't do that! I saw your father to-day. I only want a minute, and some news to take back to him; then I'll go."

A tremor, expression of a tensity too long maintained, swept her entire body. She turned uncertainly, lowering her hand from the receiver.

"Did my father send you?"

"He was very anxious for any news," Nicolas answered. "People have been running to him for it. I think he'd reached the point where he had to let out to someone; and it's only your note that's kept him from the police."

That conquered her for the moment. She sank in an arm-chair, thoroughly alarmed.

"He mustn't do that!"

"I fancy, in his shoes," Nicolas said, "I'd have tried it long ago."

He disliked the course she had made him take. Because of it she might despise him as much as she did Hal. He sat on the edge of the sofa near her chair and leant forward tensely.

"In the first place, why have you tried to hide yourself? Why did you run away from Key West after you had promised me a word?"

"I didn't promise," she said defensively. "Anyway, I only wanted to be left alone then, as I—I do now. Please tell me what my father wants. Then go."

"You can fancy his wanting to know that first of all, and it isn't clear, your insistence on being left alone in Key West."

It struck him as ironical that their positions should be reversed. Where once he had resented the intimacies into which she had always seemed trying to lead him, he strove desperately now to overcome her evasion of familiarities he believed essential between them.

"Why should you hurt me that way?" she asked.

He looked at her guiltily.

"I'm afraid Driggs and I did more than our share of hurting that night at the church."

She nodded.

"I deserved it. But since you realize you did hurt you've answered your own questions, and you must know why I couldn't stay in Key West—for a minute."

She bit her lip as if sorry she had let herself say so much.

"Driggs and I have felt like beasts about it," he apologized. "We did hope that night Hal would iron things out for you by cutting himself."

Her smile was bitterly wise.

"I never dreamed he'd do it, so I had to."

"And you were wrong," Nicolas answered eagerly. "It might interest you to know Mr. Ashmead searched desperately. He was a lost and complaining soul."

"I was sorry on his account," she answered. "He had been very good."

"I wish," Nicolas went on, "you'd understand he still is a

complaining soul. He's one of those who've been to your father. He'd welcome you back, Miss Grantley, with cheers to-morrow."

She glanced at him wonderingly.

"You're never suggesting I go back?"

"Why not? You've no right to shift your entire life about for the folly of an individual."

"You don't mean that," she caught him up scornfully.

"You know as well as I everyone isn't as blind and preoccupied as Mr. Ashmead."

Her eyes narrowed, for the first time looked daringly into his.

"You don't mean to say, Mr. Aldrich, you haven't noticed how observant women are?"

He couldn't mistake her intention. She had thrown at him as bluntly as if she had shouted it the name of Janet Ashmead, and he felt slipping painfully from about his desire his affectation of being an ambassador. Desperately he tried to cling to the disguise.

"You're over-sensitive. Anyway, Ashmead and Warden isn't the only firm in town."

Her defense weakened. For a moment he fancied her on the verge of tears.

"I've had my lesson. I don't want to put myself in the way of anything like that again."

"You dream," he asked quietly, "the chorus is safer?"

He indicated the sickly brown wall paper, torn in several places to expose flaking plaster; the patched furniture with its hideous red and green upholstery; the carpet, threadbare and stained.

"You prefer this," he prodded her, "to a houseboat and a private car; at the worst, a comfortable office?"

Like a guilty child, whose patent illogicality persuades no one, she tried to excuse herself.

"At least I can pay for it in my own way——"

"That's the point," he accused her. "You're not paying for it in your own way. Don't tell me you've forgotten saying the stage couldn't possibly fit your plans."

"That was so long ago," she muttered. "My plans have been changed."

"Why need they have been?"

There was surprise in her eyes again.

"Otherwise I should have had to bury myself because of that."

"Of what?" he asked quickly.

"Of what began to happen the moment I went to Ashmead and Warden's," she answered, "and ended the night I left Key West. There must be some other side of life worth while that I can find."

She broke off. Her expression was startled, as at having said too much.

"What are you doing, Mr. Aldrich? You said you came from my father, and you try, as usual, to make me say things I don't care to say, oughtn't to say."

Her confession thrilled him. Instinctively his hand started for her, but she drew back, and he caught himself in time; yet the hot thought flashed to his brain that if he might hold her in his arms he would be capable of using Hal's inexcusable defiance; would be willing to cry: "I'll straighten it out with Janet later!"

"Have a little patience," he said with an effort. "I don't wonder you should chance a career on the stage. Clarice was willing to admit you'd land a job without a day's training."

Her expression was hard, full of self-distaste.

"Because of my looks."

She pointed to the locked bags.

"As far as leaving the stage is concerned, Mr. Aldrich, you can spare your breath. My cowardice has finished that."

"Since you call it cowardice," he said, "how did it let you go to Clarice in the first place? But, perhaps, you wouldn't have gone to her?"

"I didn't care to go to any one who would—give me away. I applied at an agency. This musical comedy was starting on the road, and they wanted somebody of my—my type, they said. It all fitted, because it took me out of New York. I

didn't want to play in New York, I didn't want any one to know, until I—I had got somewhere."

"Poor child!" he smiled. "It doesn't happen as quickly as that. They keep types in the chorus a long time."

For a moment he fancied his sympathy had hurt her. She reddened, turned, and practised again her disturbing habit of recession.

"Do you remember," she asked coldly, "when you wanted me to pose for you?"

"Don't tell me," he cried, "that helped you to decide. I shouldn't easily forgive myself——"

"I had never had any experience at that, either," she pointed out, "but you thought me the—the type."

"It's why you wrote me that note?"

"Yes. One of the reasons."

"You meant me," he asked, "to know you had lowered yourself in your own estimation to what you thought my appraisal of you?"

She nodded.

"It wasn't a complimentary appraisal. It wasn't very pleasant that night to have you take it for granted I might change my mind about posing and let you know."

She laughed mirthlessly.

"After a few hours of this sort of life, I had to admit you were right. It seemed only just to tell you so; a penance I had earned."

"Then," he asked, "why didn't you give me an address?"

"I tell you it was a penance," she answered impatiently.

"I didn't really mean to pose for you."

"See here," he burst out, "I've my penance to make, too. I'd no intention of offending you when I asked you to pose. I'm not even sure now I thought you my type of model."

"Then why——"

"Because," he answered, flushing, "I wanted a replica of that type in my studio, where I could keep it always before me."

She stared at him, her eyes widening.

"Mr. Aldrich! You came because of that note! It gave you a mistaken idea!"

"Don't be afraid of me," he said harshly. "Don't misunderstand. I'd made up my mind to come before I got your note."

He hurried on, recapturing his control, endeavouring to dissolve her suspicion which had plainly been aroused by his momentary unrestraint.

"I wanted to know what you were up to. It's rather a good thing I didn't wait longer. Where were you going with those bags? Back to town?"

Her manner was still bewildered and apprehensive.

"I hadn't quite decided. I haven't yet. I shall probably go somewhere west, away from my—my friends."

"It's extraordinary," he mused, "this feeling of yours for flight from the very people who want to help you. I'm not too modest not to realize your seeing me this afternoon helped run you off."

She arose, started for the door, changed her mind, and turned.

"Before you leave," she said resolutely, "I suppose I ought to say you're right. Seeing you at the theatre did have a lot to do with it. I don't know just why, but your good opinion has always seemed worth while; perhaps because you've always seemed kinder, more thoughtful than your friends. I've already told you I wrote you to make sure I'd lost your good opinion. It was foolish. It was an—an impulse. The sight of you this afternoon was like something coming to life after a long burial. It wasn't only you I saw. It was everything you stood for, you and your friends; everything I'd made up my mind to avoid. I hadn't the courage. My pride wouldn't let me expose myself and confess my failure in front of all that."

She flung at him her angry demand.

"Why must you interfere? Why should you interest yourself in what I do?"

As he gazed at her lustrous hair, at her questioning eyes, at her parted lips, his sensation of enchainment grew heavier upon him. Powerful meshes hindered his hands from clasping

hers, his head from bending to her lips; and it wasn't only Janet who had made them. Eleanor Grantley through her experience with Hal had had her share of the forging. During the last few moments her fear had sprung at him. More than once, too, she had let him see that his relations with Janet were as vivid in her mind as they had been the night at the boarding house when she had pointed out to him the premature announcement of his engagement. One word of what was in his heart might arouse in her a bitterer scorn than she had shown Hal at Hill's End.

Why was she stepping back? Why had the fear grown in her eyes? Without word or gesture of his she must have read the truth, which, since his entrance, he had done his utmost to conceal. Her quick retreat convinced him that passion, whether it spring from desire or love, seeks an identical expression, for he knew now that she saw in his face something of what she had got from Hal's. There was more than fear in her regard now—a reluctant disbelief, a touch of contempt. Simultaneously, the future, as it was arranged for him, slipped drearily by, dominated by a woman he didn't love, an exigent woman who was taking him as her rightful gift. The situation here, at any rate, had passed beyond his control. He would have to carry it further than he had ever intended, than he had any right to, to spare himself Eleanor Grantley's condemnation.

"You mustn't look at me that way," he said. "I'm sorry. I've tried to hide it, but now you know why I interest myself; why I interfere, as you call it."

"Keep quiet," she cried.

"You're afraid I'd hurt you again?" he asked.

"Anything you'd say now would hurt."

Again, more resonantly, Janet's name rang in the tawdry room. Eleanor laughed ironically.

"You might remind me it isn't the first experience of the sort I've suffered."

"Don't suggest such things," he begged. "I shan't have you misconstrue my motives."

She indicated the door.

"You've proved I was right in not wanting to see you. Now you'll go."

Her flushed anger fascinated him. His revolutionary realizations of the evening surged back. He would take her in any way he could. Hal, surely, hadn't reached any more emotional a determination. The difference lay in the fact that Nicolas preferred to reach his goal by a legitimate route.

"How long," he asked, "have you guessed?"

For a moment she recaptured her inscrutability, evidently striving to furnish him the impression that nothing formidable blazed between them.

"Guessed what?" she demanded with an assumption of indifference.

"That I love you," he answered simply.

Her repression vanished. Fresh, stimulating color animated her fragile profile.

"That's the last thing you can say, Mr. Aldrich; the cruellest thing."

She spread her hands.

"I'm trying not to blame you. I suppose it's my own fault. I realize I exposed myself to it when I went to Ashmead and Warden's. Will you leave me alone now? It's the least you can do."

"My dear, dear girl," he said under his breath, "don't you see how I suffer not to touch you?"

She straightened, sighed, walked to the door. Blindly he followed her.

"Don't open just yet," he said. "Any woman owes a man a chance to explain."

She faced him.

"What can you explain?" she cried. "I'd rather you went without trying. It would only make everything worse. I was afraid of it when you forced your way here to-night. Now I know. After all, Mr. Aldrich, you are like—like——"

He held up his hand and stopped her. He had a fancy that the door had, in fact, been opened, and that Hal and

Janet and a flock of witnesses had filed in, lining themselves with an amused sense of justice behind Eleanor Grantley.

"You've no right to compare me with any one," he said, "until I've told you that I know quite well what's in your mind, that I realize I've no moral right to speak. Listen. Some day I hope I may have that right. If I take it in the meantime it's because letting you know I love you is infinitely better than pretending I don't."

She leant against the wall, her eyes wide, her lips parted. He couldn't be sure her response to his ardour wasn't wholly distaste.

"Don't, don't," she breathed. "It isn't fair to make me remind you of Miss Ashmead."

"A man changes," he said hoarsely.

Yet he knew he hadn't really altered, for his companionship with Janet had never roused the sweeping impulses he responded to now.

"Is there any harm in my telling you?"

"Yes, yes," she said. "More harm than you know."

"Only because you confuse my motives," he pleaded. "Don't you understand you fill my brain as a wife?"

She commenced to laugh harshly, but he saw a glint of tears in her eyes.

Since entering the room his outlook had scarcely pierced its tawdry boundaries. Now the walls seemed to fall away, letting him see his own shadowed room, and his mother sitting on the bed at his side; letting him hear her say she would bless any woman he might choose, and his own voice reminding her of Rany and Scatterfield, who, by ghastly outside marriages, had earned the anger of their families and the derision of their friends. Eleanor Grantley, to be sure, wasn't yet the Broadway-tainted sort for whom Rany and Scatterfield had sold themselves out, but his mother couldn't possibly detect the difference. How was he to tell her of the choice he had made at last?

He fixed his eyes on the torn paper, as if to bring the walls

together again and shut out that vision of a maternal confidence he was deliberately killing.

"Why do you laugh?" he asked sullenly.

"Because," she managed, "I'm remembering what you thought, and Mr. Wandel had the courage to say, in Key West."

He shook his head savagely.

"Don't bring that up."

"Exile from family and friends!" she mocked him. "A disillusioned man, dragging through the ugliest time imaginable, the interminable, sordid hours of an outcast!"

There was real scorn in her voice.

"After that do you expect me to take you seriously?"

"You may believe me or not," he said tensely. "I don't give a hang for any one except you."

Her open skepticism echoed in his own heart, for he hadn't yet learned not to think of his mother, who would never forgive this treachery to her idealization of him.

"Please go now," Eleanor Grantley said wearily, "and you'll never know how sorry I am you came."

Her hand went out again to the door knob, but before she could turn it he had sprung mechanically forward, and had crushed her fingers. His eyes were close to hers. The pain in them measured the strength of his grasp.

"I shan't go until you tell me whether you care at all."

Her hand which had struggled against his went limp.

"Isn't it plain enough I don't? How could I when you come this way?"

"I'll go to Miss Ashmead," he began. "I'll tell her everything——"

"You couldn't do it," she accused him. "It's her choice. And what would be the use? For I don't care. And let me tell you, Mr. Aldrich, no woman who did care would let you make such a mess of your life. Mr. Wandel was right. Thank heaven I don't care. One experience of the sort's enough."

"You never loved Hal," he charged her.

"No."

"You care no more for me?"

"No more," she whispered.

He released her hand. Its unresistance had been her best defense. She moved back until the table stood between them. He faced her, suffering a helpless rage. Somehow he had to make her understand how honest he was in his dishonesty.

"You're right," he said. "I had no business to speak, but I won't say I'm sorry. It's better to have told the truth."

Her voice was scornful.

"How much truth have you told?"

Impulsively he took up her challenge. He walked around the table, reached out, and grasped her shoulders.

"Not all," he cried. "I'll tell it now. You confuse me with Hal. Very well. I'd take you in any way I could. I love you. That's bigger than any convention I've ever been saddled with."

"Let me go," she cried. "Why are men like you supposed to be better than women like me?"

"Love," he muttered, "makes us all alike."

He laughed nearly happily as he drew her closer. She stared at him with the eyes of an animal whose helpless terror equals its fascination. He brought her curved, slightly parted lips nearer and nearer his own. In a moment he would touch them. No man could resist such a temptation. And she didn't cry out as she had on the pond. Triumphantly he reminded her of it.

"If you didn't care you'd call."

For a moment he fancied she was too frightened to. He could feel her quick breath on his face. Her lips were close—

He went cold. His tense arms no longer sought to overcome her resistance. He stared beyond her ruddy head through the rain-splashed, unshaded window. He lashed his own headstrong forgetfulness that he had been able from the opposite sidewalk to see a portion of the interior of this room; and chance had placed the compromising tableau in the most exposed position, directly between the window and the table light. Any one standing over there could see it all. Someone

was posted opposite in a shop doorway, doubtless made careless by his own jealous passion and his conception of his victims' self-absorption; for Nicolas saw the spy clearly enough. He knew his sense of a pursuit through the dark streets had been more than an abstraction. John in the flesh had followed. At this moment John saw Eleanor Grantley in a cheap hotel room, caught in Nicolas Aldrich's arms.

XI

PURSUIT

NICOLAS relaxed his grasp and let Eleanor Grantley go. "Step back," he said quietly. The colour returned to her cheeks. She looked at him confusedly.

"What is it?"

"Step back."

She obeyed, and, standing at the end of the sofa, out of the window's range, repeated her question. He didn't know how to answer it. He didn't care to tell her that John, through his carelessness, had seen enough to jump at abominable and unfair conclusions; that he was quite capable of carrying those hazards as facts to Hal, to the Ashmeads, to any one who would listen.

"It's the window," she whispered. "Somebody saw!"

She started for the curtains, but he waved her back.

"No. Not now. Leave the shade up."

"There was someone watching!"

He shook his head.

"There was," she persisted. "Who?"

"I only realized," he quibbled, "someone might look in."

Disregarding his command, she ran to the window, raised the sash, and leaned out.

"Well? Do you see anyone?" he asked.

She closed the window, lowered the shade, and turned, puzzled, worried.

"There's no one."

Had John so greedily started on his errand of tale-bearing?

"What was it, Mr. Aldrich?" she insisted.

"I told you it was merely an idea."

He couldn't comfort her with that. She must be wise enough to know a precautionary sense wouldn't have made him give up the caress his strength had been about to tear from her weakness. He wouldn't be able, moreover, to dominate her again in that fashion. He couldn't recapture his chance to-night, and he very well knew he might never touch it again.

Her voice was very tired.

"It makes no difference. I am unfortunate. First it was you and Mr. Wandel who saw. Now someone else—and with you. I am sorry for you, Mr. Aldrich. It really doesn't matter about me. What a fool I was ever to dream at Hal-loran's. I haven't been exactly lucky, have I?"

"No matter what you'd done," he said dully, "I'd have kissed you a moment ago."

He caught her gesture of repulsion.

"Am I so disagreeable to you?" he asked.

"All along I've tried to tell you," she answered. "You've done everything you could to-night to make me dislike you more. I don't care who saw as long as you were reminded in time of your friends and their opinions."

"I care nothing for that," he said, "except as it affects you. When am I to see you again?"

"Why do you ask? You know perfectly well you'll not see me again."

"I will," he urged.

"If I don't wish it?" she asked.

"Try to wish it," he said. "You never wanted any man to touch you——"

Her shoulders twitched as if in distasteful recollection of the contact of his hands.

"You least of any one."

"I don't believe you," he cried. "Someday I shall touch your lips. I'll make you care for me. It makes no difference how. In any way I can. It's only to-night I've really come to life. I'm going to make you live, too, Eleanor."

The tinkling of the telephone bell disturbed her immobility that was nearly hypnotic.

"Suppose that's whoever was watching?" she breathed.

Nicolas laughed. At the possibility of John's coming here he felt stronger, better, cleaner. If he could get his hands on the man he would manage to keep him quiet.

"Answer the telephone," he directed.

In a low, determined voice she spoke into the transmitter.

"I will not see him. Please say I have left."

She turned angrily on Nicolas.

"Why didn't you tell me it was Mr. Ashmead looking through the window?"

"Harold Ashmead!" he cried. "It wasn't."

"The clerk," she answered, "said Mr. Ashmead was downstairs asking for me."

He thought rapidly. The coincidence wasn't exceptional. He had no unique genius for finding people. The theatre had offered its clue to other anxious ones; and he might have guessed from the start what Hal's good resolutions were worth.

"Suppose," she was saying, "he should attempt to come up as you did?"

"All the more reason for my staying," he answered.

She spoke disdainfully.

"You mean you'd rather have me hide you here than risk meeting him in the hall?"

He smiled easily.

"Scarcely. I shall stay to make sure he doesn't annoy you any more."

She voiced her old boast.

"I can take care of myself."

"After having given every indication that you could," he answered, "you've failed thoroughly. I'll go when he's had time to learn there's someone now to take care of you."

Her anger faded before a growing wonder.

"You'd meet him here, say such things to—to her brother?"

He nodded. With all his heart he welcomed the chance.

"Hush!" she said, and bent forward listening.

The whining of the elevator was distantly audible. The metal door on their floor clanged. Her face twisted as she nodded toward the bedroom.

"Then you must go in there."

"Thanks, but I don't care to. I've done nothing to hide."

She stepped forward, grasped his arm, tried to draw him across the room.

"Don't you see?" she argued breathlessly. "I won't have you waste your future for nothing."

"For nothing?" he laughed, drawing back.

"Yes. I don't care for you. It's the last time you'll see me. Go in there and keep yourself straight with your friends, Mr. Aldrich."

The hot conviction of her voice chilled him.

"Gad! What a rare one you must think me!"

As he freed his arm, he heard stealthy steps in the hall.

"He's just outside," she said helplessly.

A knock echoed sharply from the panels. She ran to the door probably with the idea of holding it to spare him so empty a sacrifice. He leant against the table waiting, his passion drowned in the acrid waters of failure. The knock was repeated. She turned the key resolutely. Her voice rose.

"I will not let you in. I will not have people coming this way."

There was a pause. Nicolas, surprised, not knowing what deduction to draw, thought he heard a whispered consultation.

"Unlock the door," he said.

But she shook her head.

"He'll go away," she answered hopefully.

"He's not alone," Nicolas informed her.

A complaining voice came from the hall:

"Eleanor! Please let me in."

She drew suddenly back.

"You said you came from him," she shot at Nicolas. "What's he doing here?"

Nicolas shrugged his shoulders, walked to the door, noiselessly unlocked it, and threw it wide.

"You made a quick trip, sir," he said to Beau Ashmead.

Mr. Grantley entered first. In his carefully chosen finery he appeared less assured than he had during his period of rags. His eyes, quite empty of their trustfulness, asked questions his lips evidently didn't dare form.

Beau Ashmead followed, twirling his cane, his withered face without expression, his glance absorbing every detail.

Nicolas looked anxiously at Eleanor Grantley. Her rare gift hadn't failed her. In a moment she had got herself under control, and met the intruders with no more revealing emotion than annoyance. The sarcasm of her voice stung.

"It's a blessing my having a place to receive so many unexpected callers."

Mr. Grantley spoke with a querulous appeal.

"You can't call me that. Why did you run away from us again, Eleanor?"

"Evidently I didn't run very rapidly," she answered.

"Hush up, Grantley," Beau Ashmead rattled. "Got your wire, Nick, in time to pick him up and catch the eight o'clock. Found out about this palace at the theatre."

Again the infused eyes roved with businesslike precision about the room. Eleanor Grantley asked pointedly:

"Why should you be in such a hurry to find me, Mr. Ashmead?"

The old man strolled over and tapped the bags with his cane.

"Maybe I was wise to be in a hurry," he chuckled.

He glanced from her to Nicolas.

"Daresay Nick didn't get here much too soon, either."

Nicolas read in the mummy-like features open incredulity.

"Maybe you were going to tote her luggage to the station, Nick? Didn't see any automobile outside."

"I got here, sir," Nicolas answered, "a few minutes ago, about as Miss Grantley was leaving."

"So you'll understand," she said, "I haven't much time."

"Heaven knows I don't need a lot of it," Beau Ashmead rattled. "But let's sit down. Your father and I have come, pretty fast for middle-aged men."

He seated himself on the sofa. Mr. Grantley, with the air of obeying an order, took one of the revoltingly upholstered chairs. Eleanor and Nicolas remained standing. Her attitude hinted her resentment.

Nicolas was caught by Beau Ashmead's satirical manner. As he continued to study the wrinkled face he experienced a lively disappointment that Hal hadn't entered instead. He would have liked to have it out with Hal, to let Janet's brother know her insufficient, nearly dishonest lure had lost its vitality. Whatever suspicion Beau Ashmead might play with, therefore, troubled him not at all. In any case he had come here as the old man's ambassador. His presence, consequently, was legitimate.

"Maybe you don't know, Miss Grantley," the old man said, "that they're aching at the theatre to put your name up in lights."

"I understood what I was doing when I refused to go on to-night," she answered.

"And where were you off to with all the baggage?"

"If I've committed a crime," she answered, "it's against the manager. I don't quite see why any one else should cross-examine me."

Mr. Grantley bent forward.

"Eleanor, you're coming home with me."

At first she didn't answer, and Beau Ashmead shook his cane.

"What's the matter? Why don't you say something? The cat got your tongue?"

"What's the use?" she asked.

Beau Ashmead turned.

"You been giving her the old scratch, Nick?"

"Why shouldn't he," she asked easily, "since everyone does?"

"That's fine," Beau Ashmead pronounced in a congratulatory tone. "Because you've deserved it, young lady, running off, without saying a word, to be an actress."

"Why do you care, Mr. Ashmead?" she asked.

Her father raised a fearful hand.

"Don't talk to Mr. Ashmead that way, Eleanor."

Beau Ashmead got up stiffly, walked to her, and with bony fingers pinched her cheek.

"You mustn't be mad with me, my dear."

"But why have you come?"

"Maybe because I like you," he chuckled.

He glanced around sharply.

"Maybe that's why Nick came, too."

"No," she said. "He came because you sent him."

Nicolas wanted to burst out with the truth; for her sake he couldn't.

The old man rambled on, his parchment face grinning at her smooth, young one.

"If you think a minute, my dear, of all the things I might know about, you wouldn't wonder at my wanting to see you."

"Don't," she begged.

"Then," Beau Ashmead lied cheerfully, "I'm very fond of your father. You've given him and your mother quite a scare. I thought if you realized that you'd like to make it up to them."

She nodded.

"I'm ashamed of it. It was selfish."

"Nick!" Beau Ashmead said sharply.

Nicolas started.

"What is it, sir?"

"Must say you've done a first-class job. I was wise when I had this idea you could find her."

"Thanks," Nicolas said dryly, and waited.

Beau Ashmead walked to the chair where Nicolas had placed his overcoat and prodded it with his stick.

"You mean I've done enough?" Nicolas asked sardonically.

"You're quick," the old man grinned. "Papa Grantley's the one to take charge now."

Nicolas put on his coat, reflecting that Beau Ashmead was right. The sooner he went the better, since his presence might affect the decision they all wanted Eleanor Grantley to make; but he had an uncomfortable doubt that this desire to get rid of him might be based on more than expediency, or even suspicion. Suppose John had met the pair entering the hotel?

"Good-night, Miss Grantley," he said. "I'm sorry if I've made you feel a trifle like a truant."

He longed to touch her hand, but he realized the unfairness of making her submit to a contact that from him would be a caress. It was difficult, nevertheless, to back formally out, carrying the memory of her cold, relieved nod.

While he waited for the elevator Beau Ashmead joined him in the hall.

"Maybe it's just as well," the old man said with the manner of a conspirator, "no one but me and Papa Grantley caught you in that sitting-room."

The thought of John assumed a fresh, premonitory quality. Even if he hadn't met Beau Ashmead and Mr. Grantley it was impossible to foresee all the evils that might grow from his spying.

"No one did?" Beau Ashmead asked anxiously.

"Who would have?"

The wrinkled face leered.

"Good! Tell Janet I'd sent you off on my work?"

Nicolas's exasperation increased.

"I'd an idea you didn't want it shouted about. I'll tell her to-morrow if you wish."

The bald head shook.

"Mum's the word, Nick. See you in town. Much obliged."

The elevator shot up and the door clanged open. Nicolas stepped in, depressed by the cold opposition of Eleanor Grantley, that seemed a graver obstacle to his happiness than were his friends, his parents, or even Janet herself.

He awakened with a dismal appreciation of obligations. Even though the future seemed hopeless because of his entanglement with Janet and Eleanor Grantley's indifference, he experienced a guilty prompting to tell his mother of his choice. On that, perhaps, his conscience would shift its view. It could wait.

His duty to Janet was even less defined but more peremptory. He could only phrase it as a difficult need to give her her way.

Already she had had sufficient opportunity to realize his lack of ardour; yet she had said nothing, had failed to reproach him. Evidently she meant to evade his growing indifference; and he didn't see how he could properly drag it within her narrow vision. If she chose to cling to him he would be, indeed, captive, while she would remain free; for such a marriage would mean on her part only the fulfilment of a worldly wish; it wouldn't bind her otherwise. And more and more since last night, his heart had room for only one woman.

In spite of the unwisdom of such a move he commenced to plan a renewal of last evening's thrilling companionship. Because of the old man's manner in Philadelphia he didn't care to apply to Beau Ashmead for news of what had happened after his departure. Mr. Grantley was a different proposition, and Nicolas went to his office.

"Yes," Mr. Grantley admitted, "Eleanor came home with me. She's at the apartment now. I wasn't to say anything about it, but there can't be any harm telling you, since you found her."

"Why so much secrecy?" Nicolas asked.

Mr. Grantley shook his head.

"Mr. Ashmead's idea, and you have to give him his way."

At least Nicolas had got what he wanted. Eleanor Grantley was in good hands. Although she might be with her parents it was Beau Ashmead's guardianship that counted, and now one might see her.

While he hastened uptown Nicolas wondered what form the old man's payment would take; but he was more interested in speculations as to her manner when she should for the first time receive him in her father's home, and he questioned why there should be this attempt to keep her presence there secret.

He found Mr. Grantley's address in gilt over the entrance to a respectable-appearing, old-fashioned house on upper Lexington Avenue. There was no elevator, but the boy directed him to the first-floor front apartment. He rang the bell and waited until the delay seemed to indicate that the place was empty. At last he heard a step within and the door swung partly open. A slender,

tall, middle-aged woman blocked the threshold. In spite of her steel-like quality there survived about face and contour faded traces of a beauty that branded her Eleanor Grantley's mother. The hair was quite gray, and the stern lines of the face wrote a clear record of a struggle for which she had been obviously unfitted. About the whole figure, indeed, was a forbidding rigidity, fused, one would guess, of disillusionment, of suffering, of their consequent mistrust. As far as a human being could be it the woman was the antithesis of her husband.

"I am Nicolas Aldrich. I have come to see Miss Grantley," Nicolas said.

If a final proof had been needed her voice would have supplied it. Without going so far as Hal's description, Nicolas admitted that the tone had a quality unpleasantly sharp and impatient.

"I'm afraid you can't."

"She isn't in?" Nicolas asked.

"She's in," Mrs. Grantley answered, "but she doesn't care to see any one."

"I hope she's not ill?"

She stared, probably at the concern in his voice.

"She's very tired."

"If you took my card——" Nicolas suggested.

But she shook her head determinedly.

"It wouldn't be any use, because it's her own wish to see no one."

"But I wanted so to have just a word," Nicolas said.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Aldrich."

"When," he asked, "do you think I might see her?"

"It depends on her."

The provocative thought of Eleanor Grantley's loveliness within a few feet, perhaps within earshot of his persistence, urged him to a final effort.

"Could you ask her when she'll see me, Mrs. Grantley?"

"Just wait a moment," the woman yielded.

But as she stepped back she closed the door without apology. Even then the sordid side of his enterprise weighed nothing

against his memory of Eleanor held by his grasp while he drew her lips nearer. He waited, bewildered by this stern opposition.

The door was opened again. Mrs. Grantley's mouth curved in a half smile.

"She was asleep, Mr. Aldrich. I didn't think it wise to disturb her."

He went, puzzled and helpless; almost certain the woman, prompted by her daughter, had told a lie. After all, had he any right to pursue her? She had said again and again she didn't care for him. Besides she knew, as matters stood, he had nothing acceptable to offer. Had he hoped to sweep her by his own passion into caring? She had to be made to care. He kept repeating it to himself as he walked aimlessly down through the park. There was a possibility, moreover, that the decision not to see him had never really been hers. He visualized the bony hand of old Beau Ashmead. Those dry fingers were at the situation, seemed to grasp it, and hold it wholly at their mercy. The thought chilled. When he had telegraphed Beau Ashmead, when he had hoped Eleanor Grantley would follow the old man's advice, he had never dreamed of such a cloistering as this. Was it arranged for her sake, for Janet's, or for both? Ever since he had left the hotel room in Philadelphia he had assumed that Eleanor's return with Beau Ashmead and her father would keep her within reach, that he would have to face, aside from Janet, no obstacle less surmountable than her wish not to see him. Now she seemed infinitely farther away than she had been after her flight from Key West when no one could guess where she had gone.

For a long time he paced the park paths, striving to discover the way out of his dilemma. His first hot instinct was to run to Beau Ashmead demanding an explanation and the right to talk to her. It wouldn't do. He had no rights whatever where the Ashmeads were concerned.

It was dark when he crossed Madison Avenue on his way home. He noticed a figure lounging against an area railing in an attitude of patient waiting. A familiar touch about the pose quickened Nicolas's pulse, carried him back to the dingy room

in Philadelphia and his glimpse from its window of one avariciously intent on spying. He grasped his stick tighter and walked on. The figure straightened, swayed uncertainly, spoke. In voice and gesture was conveyed a yielding to an old appetite. The man was half drunk.

"Hope you're not in a hurry, Mr. Aldrich."

Nicolas paused.

"It's you, John," he said. "Fancied you'd got work out of town."

"Nothing like it. I can get work where I like. Although you may not have seen me, I had a glimpse of you, Mr. Aldrich, not so long ago."

Nicolas's nerves tightened. He wanted to know what form the man's threats would take, yet his only sensible course was to walk on.

"Sorry, John, but I am in a hurry."

The chauffeur started after him, muttering:

"I've been waiting a long time. Better hear what I've got on my mind."

Nicolas paused.

"Out with it, but be quick."

John stood swaying.

"You so sure you didn't see me last night, Mr. Aldrich?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Can't say I didn't give you fair warning," John went on.

"Kind of you," Nicolas snapped. "About what?"

"About Eleanor Grantley. I said hands off for your sort, and it seems it wasn't Mr. Harold but you who couldn't keep your hands off, although you were engaged."

"Enough of that, John!" Nicolas commanded. "It isn't the first time I've known you to play with blackmail. If that's what you had to tell me——"

The man ceased his swaying, lost his revengeful leer, was swept by his hallucination of a sublime errand.

"Not blackmail, Mr. Aldrich; just a liking to see you get what you've earned."

Nicolas turned and started off again, but John came pattering

at his heels, mouthing a detestable appreciation of his own virtuous course.

"I had to do it. Even Mr. Harold quit when he got in the papers with another woman. I saw what went on in that dive last night, and I've told your woman about it."

Nicolas paused, glancing up and down the street. Except for John and himself the block was deserted.

"You mean you've been to Miss Ashmead?"

John nodded.

"And to some other people. That's fair. Maybe Eleanor wouldn't have cooked her hash if it hadn't been for you. I'm through with her. Posing as an angel when she's as bad as any of them!"

Nicolas shifted his cane.

"Put your hands up," he said softly.

"What's the idea?"

"Put your hands up," Nicolas repeated in the same satisfied voice. "I'm going to drive that back in your mouth, and it's going to stay there."

John commenced to move warily away.

"Isn't fair! That stick——"

Nicolas dropped his cane. Afterward he wondered he hadn't heard it rattle on the flagging. He stepped after the retreating figure, his right fist shooting through John's surprised and feeble guard. The chauffeur staggered back.

Nicolas waited. John started forward in a dazed way, then thought better of it.

"Get out!" Nicolas ordered him. "And don't let me hear from you again."

Nicolas's physical superiority was obvious, and realization of his own uncertain condition probably impressed John with the easier course. He turned tail and slunk down the street, muttering to himself.

Nicolas picked up his cane and went on to the house, filled with disgust, shocked by the man's insult. Nicolas had brought that on Eleanor Grantley, no one but he could wipe out its black exaggeration. And he was tied. Then the significance of what

John had said became clearer, suggesting a solution. Janet knew. Since she understood now its apparently unforgivable cause she could no longer evade his indifference. He was sorry the knowledge had had to reach her in just that way. The point, however, was that she knew, and he would tell her the entire story in order to clear that innocent, harassed girl. He needn't wait, for he would be with Janet at a dance to-night. They would have it out and he would be free to make amends if Eleanor Grantley would have them.

His thoughts were occupied with that difficult, impending interview when his mother entered his room.

"Do I disturb you, dear?"

He glanced at her. He had detected a fresh anxiety in her voice.

"Never, Mother."

She carried a piece of paper in her hand.

"I won't be a moment, Nicolas. I thought I ought to tell you of a curious and disagreeable thing that's just happened."

"You're worried, Mother. What is it?"

She offered him the sheet of paper. It was half covered by a coarse handwriting. Her voice was trustful.

"A man left this for me half an hour ago. I couldn't guess, so I opened it; but I haven't read it—except the first few lines. And I did see it wasn't anonymous."

Nicolas took the sheet and glanced over its message.

"I didn't suppose you'd see me, so I thought I'd better tell you this way what kind of a man your son is; and if you want to see me then I can give you plenty of proof."

He hurried through the recital of what John had seen last night. In black and white it carried a meaning more damaging than he had realized. He was, moreover, confused by the unexpectedness of the situation. Foolishly he had never thought of John's going to his family. While he stared at the odious, unjust charge his conscience reminded him he should in the first place have answered his mother's trust by a full account

of the change he had experienced. At last he handed the paper back to her.

"You'd better read it all, Mother."

"But why?" she asked tremulously.

"Because it's true enough except for its filthy deductions."

Her dazed eyes glanced at the paper.

"Nicolas, you mean you—my boy——"

He took her hand and led her to a chair.

"Nicolas!" she asked weakly, "what were you doing in that place?"

He laughed harshly.

"Finding out I was in love. That's truly all. She didn't want to see me. I went up, unannounced, and made her let me in."

"What are you talking about? I don't believe you, Nicolas. I can't believe you."

He bent over and touched her hair with his lips.

"It's true, dear Mother. I ought to have told you this morning. Do you remember last autumn, sitting with me over there on the bed? You promised me then you'd bless any woman I might choose."

She glanced falteringly at the bed, her eyes filled with abashed recollection.

"I thought I knew my boy. Who—who is this woman?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"From your point of view she's pretty dreadful. She worked at Ashmead and Warden's. She's the one I tried to get to pose for me. I'm not at all sure I didn't care for her then. You see, it isn't simple to destroy the unjust attitude we take toward such people. I've been restless and unhappy for a long time. I think I learned the reason last night."

She sank back in her chair. She seemed to have grown smaller, to have shrivelled.

"I know," she whispered, "that men do such things—temporarily——"

He placed his hand over her mouth.

"Hush!"

"That night," she reminded him, "you mentioned Ned Rany and Tom Scatterfield."

"Don't, Mother. It's quite another matter. I know it's hard to make you believe that. Hal wanted her; begged her to marry him in Key West. She wouldn't."

She looked straight at him. There was adoration in her eyes from which slow tears trickled.

"Because she preferred my boy."

His laugh was harsh.

"Then I'll tell you she won't have him."

She shook her head, contemptuous of his credulity.

"When I went to see her this afternoon she wouldn't even let me in."

"That's clever."

Her eyes brightened.

"But she can't have you," she said eagerly. "There's Janet."

He realized that his mother, even in such an instance, couldn't fancy him departing from the ritual her family had invariably bowed to; and it was clear, where once she had resented her capture of him, she would now use Janet as the one defense against his selling himself out to a designing creature.

"I know there's Janet," he agreed. "You were right about her in the first place. I never cared in the real way. I've only found out what that way is."

"She led you, my boy. I could see it. That's why I knew it was wrong."

She added significantly:

"But you let yourself be led. Your duty remains."

"I fancy Janet will let me off that duty now," he said dryly, "because she's been told, too."

His mother let him measure then the strength with which she had clung to the thought of Janet as a rescuer. She covered her face with her hands.

"I wouldn't take it too much to heart," he said despondently. "I've told you she won't see me."

"And I've told you," his mother answered bitterly, "that's clever."

He sat on the arm of her chair.

"Listen!" he said.

Mercilessly he detailed his acquaintance with Eleanor Grantley, sparing his mother nothing—the rooms on Third Avenue, the home with Halloran, the sordid arrival of her father, the business college, John's motive for writing the note and going to Janet.

"You must be wrong," his mother said. "What makes you think it love?"

"Because," he answered, "I wouldn't let myself for so long dream the thing possible. I realize now my blindness was only a habit of thought, which wouldn't let the truth in. I understand my idealization of her, my wish to paint her, was only a ruse to have her near."

She stood up.

"You have, indeed, been blinded, Nicolas. I should at least see this woman who's so altered my son."

"I doubt if she'd see you any more than she will me. But I'm going to try again, keep on trying."

He smiled wistfully.

"Mother, she is more likely to spare you pain than I."

Her scepticism didn't diminish.

"If Janet could be made to forgive you!" she breathed.

He laughed shortly.

"Can you fancy any woman's doing that?"

"For some women," she answered, "such people as this girl can hardly be said to exist."

"That's the cruellest thing I've ever heard you say, Mother."

"You've done a cruel thing, my boy."

He spoke as he had to Eleanor Grantley.

"I'm sorry I've hurt you."

She turned at the door.

"Every mother ought to know when she bears a child she's bound to be hurt."

In a moment she was back in the room, her arms around Nicolas, begging him to forgive her.

"I shouldn't have said it. I must have time to think. I shan't tell your father. I'll go over it first, and you'll promise me, dear, to do nothing until I have thought it out. That's all I ask."

"You mean not to marry her? Small chance."

"I mean promise to do nothing, nothing whatever. Do you understand? Nothing."

"I shall try to see her," he persisted.

"I don't mean that," she plead. "I mean nothing—definite."

He marvelled at her insistence, didn't know what to draw from it, but to quiet her he promised.

"Then I can kiss you," she said. "There's still time. You're not so changed as you think."

Across the restless ballroom Nicolas caught a glimpse of Janet dancing with Dicky Goodhue, and tried to see her face to read her response to John's tale-bearing. At first she was too far away. He leant against the wall, waiting for her to come nearer, shrinking from her approach, and the necessary, disagreeable, final discussion in which they would be almost immediately involved.

Here Dicky came now, swinging her each moment closer. All at once her face was turned to him, and he gazed, struck motionless with unbelief at her brilliant unconcern. She swept by, waving a careless hand, offering a friendly smile. If John had been to her his story had left no record. She was the Janet of other days—her thoughts in a shell, hard to get at.

Spurred by angry suspense he blundered after, caught her, and took her away from Dicky; but he wouldn't dance. It was beyond him to hold her close with that misshapen knowledge gliding perpetually between them. Where, moreover, he had shrunk a moment ago from the interview, her manner now made him anxious to get at it, to have it over.

"What's the matter?" she asked, surprised. "Aren't we going to trip about?"

"It's rather warm and crowded," he answered. "Let's sit somewhere for a minute."

"But I'd rather dance——"

They were near the door, and he urged her through. Her reluctance was expressed through a jerky fingering of her fan.

"What's the matter with you, Nick?"

He spied a bench in a corner. They could talk safely there. As they sat down he saw a feather or two drop from her fan, and he smiled grimly. She'd heard from John right enough, and she cared rather less than Nicolas for the inevitable sequel. Then, while he waited for her denunciation, she calmly, resolutely disarmed him, and at the same moment seemed to throw away her own weapon.

"Maybe it's just as well you've brought me to this sentimental solitude, although it isn't like you. I've news—something of a confession. I ought to have mentioned it before. I've about decided to go West with the Glendons."

He looked at her. Was this her way of breaking off? He'd heard somewhere that the Glendons were starting on a jaunt to-morrow. If, before listening to John, Janet had thought of joining them, Nicolas as a matter of course would have heard of it.

"What on earth are you talking about, Janet?"

She let him see her plans had nothing to do with breaking off.

"Then," she asked brightly, "you'd miss me? Really, Nick, don't you think a little absence—about a month, I believe—might make you appreciate me more?"

It was the first opening she had given him.

"I'm sorry if I've seemed unappreciative. Things have come up. You know some of them now. It's only fair to you we should go over that, Janet——"

She had risen excitedly, and stood beckoning to Jack Berry who strolled by with Driggs Wandel.

"Jack!" she called. "Nick's hanging me up. He's getting old and listless."

And as Berry and Wandel approached she gave Nicolas a reproving glance.

"You sound like a funeral tribute, my dear. What's it all about?"

Before Nicolas could answer, Berry and Wandel were with them; Janet was holding out her hands.

"If you won't dance with me, Nick, Jack will. Won't you, Jack? But I'd prefer my own man."

"Hanged if I'll have him preferred," Berry said vividly. "Come on, Janet. Let's leave the disapproving Turk."

She nodded and went off, laughing, with Berry. Nicolas's eyes followed her as far as the ballroom door. He felt the sting of ineptness; of having been, through some unconformable strategy, outwitted.

"To use," Wandel drawled, "the emptiest simile in the language, you look as though you'd seen a ghost."

"Are there such things?" Nicolas asked gruffly. "One scarcely thinks the world holds anything so ethereal."

"Ah, there you're wrong," Wandel said. "I can think of many ethereal things, and of a few, a very few, dreamy and shadowy people. I needn't remind you of one——"

"She seems to be an obsession with you," Nicolas interrupted. "What's become of her? Seen her lately?"

Wandel's smile was contented.

"No, but I shall soon."

Nicolas started restlessly away. Was the little man serious? If so, Eleanor Grantley was willing to give Driggs privileges she denied him. Wandel's absurd musings in Key West slipped irritatingly back, and the advice offered him about marriage by his self-made man. You couldn't tell how much such things meant, for Wandel's very precision of conduct was a pose. At heart conventions meant nothing to him, because he stood so far above them. No one had ever been able to forecast what he would do in an emergency, and he had never been involved in a situation comparable with this. For the first time Nicolas experienced a positive dislike for his redundancies, his sharp secretiveness.

Harold Ashmead caught Nicolas, glanced at him quizzically, and grasped his elbow.

"Cut the dull show for a minute. There's a quiet corner in the smoking-room."

Hal's knowledge was in his face, but at the moment Nicolas liked the prospect of a row.

"Needn't lead me. Come ahead."

As they passed along the hall Mary and her mother stepped from the elevator. Nicolas paused and spoke. Hal fidgeted.

"Wondered if you were coming," he said to Mary. "Glad you did."

Her smile perplexed Nicolas. The uncertainty of her expression had diminished, but whether she were happier or not he couldn't guess.

He hurried Hal away. On a lounge before the smoking-room fireplace, safe from others' ears, Hal let him have it.

"No need telling you what I want. Seems the coin's on the other side."

Nicolas lighted a cigarette. He puffed indifferently. He spoke without concern.

"I gather John's been at it again."

"He's afflicted my temper and amazement," Hal said.

"It would help me," Nicolas suggested, "if you could say he had failed to arouse your jealousy."

Hal reddened.

"Well," Nicolas prodded him.

"I've been to Mary, Nick," Hal said under his breath.

Nicolas started.

"You're serious?"

"Perfectly. I made a clean breast of it. I didn't hold back anything. I told her I'd gone mad, and that the realization had helped me back to a sense of proportions."

"And Mary?" Nicolas asked anxiously.

"She was a brick," Hal enthused. "I mean, when I begged her not to decide offhand, not to throw me out on the spot, she said she didn't mind drifting awhile if it would make me feel better, since it made so little difference to her."

Such a decision, and its expression, were characteristic of Mary, but even with this clue, Nicolas couldn't be sure whether what he had recently seen in her face had been a growth or a diminution of her discontent.

"Do you really think you care for her?" Nicolas asked.

"I'd rather not go into that," Hal said uneasily. "It's quite beyond me. I only know since I talked to her I've slept like a top, and I've worked like a dog, and I've become sure the other burning thing isn't real."

"Isn't it?" Nicolas asked coolly. "I fancy that's a matter of temperament and honesty. I've far from your volatility, Hal. I sometimes hope I've rather more than your honesty."

"Rub it in," Hal grinned, "and make your excuses before or after. You haven't forgotten asking me at the opera what I'd do if I were in your place?"

"I remember."

"To-night," Hal went on, "I'm in precisely the censorious position you occupied then. I've long looked on you as a great moralist, Nick, and more than once I've had to face you with a hang-dog air. Now it seems you're tarred with the same brush!"

Nicolas raised his hand.

"You're so impressed by John's opinions?"

"You'll be the first to admit," Hal said, "he was right in my case."

"And," Nicolas hazarded, "you'll be the last to admit he might have jumped at wrong conclusions in mine."

"If he did," Hal jeered, "he must have jumped with his eyes shut."

"It won't wash, Hal," Nicolas said seriously. "You know her too well to believe what John does."

"I apologize," Hal said sullenly. "The point's Janet."

"Yes," Nicolas agreed, "but our positions aren't wholly reversed, because Janet happens to know."

"Is that your fault?" Hal flashed. "She got it from that blackguard to-day."

Nicolas reached for a plausible explanation of Janet's manner to-night.

"Did she ask you to speak to me?"

Hal denied it.

"She said what you evidently think, that it's none of my business. Just the same it is. You thought I'd committed a crime

for not telling Mary what went on. Why the deuce didn't you tell Janet long ago you were head over heels with another woman? Now I realize you displayed the symptoms in Key West, on the boat, even before, in town here."

"It's simple," Nicolas said, "to look back on the steps once you've reached a fact. Whether you believe it or not it wasn't until last night that I arrived."

Hal clasped his hands between his knees and gazed reflectively at the fire.

"Dashed inconsistent of me to blame you, because I know that girl's white through and through."

"Too bad it took you so long to find it out."

Hal nodded.

"I deserve it. Rub it in. But the first chance I get I'm going on my knees to her to ask for grace."

Nicolas cleared his throat, tried to speak complacently.

"Maybe you've an idea when the chance'll come."

Hal shook his head.

"But Driggs knows where she is and expects to see her almost any day."

Driggs again! Then Eleanor Grantley, while she refused to communicate with Nicolas, was in touch with Wandel.

"I'd like to be honest," Nicolas said moodily. "I can white-wash you to the extent of admitting it's difficult. Here's the fact. I'd marry her in a flash if it weren't for Janet"—he looked away—"and Eleanor Grantley herself."

"A nice position for Janet!" Hal cried.

Nicolas spoke deliberately.

"I dined with Janet awhile ago. I sat alone with her."

The flush came back to Hal's face.

"A brother's duty's none too easy, either."

"Sure it's not a friend's revenge?" Nicolas smiled.

"See here," Hal argued almost apologetically. "You can't expect Janet to take John's beastly gossip seriously. When all's said and done it sounds like a piece of blackmail."

"You mean," Nicolas agreed, "you want me to go to Janet as I wished you to go to Mary. You want me to give her, in a

form she can't doubt, the real facts. That ought to be done for Miss Grantley's sake, anyway. I mean someone's got to iron out John's libels."

"Can't ask any more," Hal muttered.

He was uncomfortable, still flushed. He stood up, thrust his hands in his pockets, and swayed uncertainly in front of the fire.

"Thing is," he managed, "you've got to take into consideration the point of view of a girl like Janet. Even with the facts, she mightn't cry her eyes out over what to her would look like a rotten silly bit of straying, but a rotten usual one. Affair with a chick! If Janet wants to take it like that, you've got to consider her feelings. I mean, you're not exactly in a position to throw her over if she doesn't care to throw you."

Nicolas could only express his agreement. Everyone, even Eleanor Grantley, felt it was Janet's choice.

Hal shook off his embarrassment. He laughed maliciously.

"Anyway, you can't say I haven't done my best to save you from a crowning folly. Disillusionment of an outcast! And all that! I've tried to do as well by you and Driggs as you precious meddlers did by me."

Nicolas frowned.

"I'm beginning to think," he mused, "there are worse things than being outcast, than being flung out of a little world into an infinitely bigger, realer, more engrossing one."

He sought Janet straightway, but, strangely, she had already left. He heard rumours of a headache. At least there was nothing he could do to-night, but in the morning he would telephone her; hurry uptown; and, perhaps in the conservatory that had housed the birth of their sentimental incubus, crush, by a full confession, the last breath from its deformed body.

He breakfasted alone with his mother. Her rosy face held no record of a sleepless night, but at the first moment anxiety sprang from it, and suspense disclosed itself in fingers, customarily deft, that moved awkwardly about the breakfast things. Curiosity as to what had passed between Nicolas and

Janet the night before was patently responsible for such symptoms, but the fact was too unexpected and disturbing for Nicolas to offer it as an antidote. It was only when his mother put the direct question that he told her how Janet had behaved. Some of the colour went out of her face then, but her gestures, once more facile, disclosed relief.

"It's as I said last night. Such a woman doesn't really exist for Janet."

"I shall bring her to life," Nicolas said.

His mother's manner became bewildered.

"Something has changed you," she whispered. "How can you, Nicolas? You must do what Janet wishes."

He sipped his coffee.

"Hal tells me it's my duty to recite it all to Janet. And surely, Mother, you'll let me owe some slight duty to Miss Grantley. Janet thoroughly misunderstands. No matter of how little consequence you and Janet may think a woman, her good name counts for something."

Mrs. Aldrich sighed.

"Nothing at all to Janet. Why should it?"

She placed her finger on her lips.

"Keep quiet. Here is your father."

From the studio Nicolas got the Ashmead house on the telephone. Janet's voice came to him after a long wait, impatient and disapproving.

"You've no idea what a nuisance you are, Nick."

"They told me last night," he said, "you had gone home not very well. I hope it isn't that."

She laughed.

"What's happening is a tonic. I'm rushing my head off, collecting, packing, patching."

Even then he failed to catch the full significance of her strategy.

"You've decided to go with the Glendons?" he cried. "I've never known you do things in such a hurry."

"It isn't often one has to. It's thrilling," she laughed.

"I must see you right away, Janet. I'll run up now."

Her voice was horrified.

"Not this morning!"

"Yes."

"No, no, no. I'm not fit to see a—a dressmaker. Am I not supposed to put my best foot forward for you?"

"This is more important than appearances," he said seriously.

"You're off for a long time."

"But," she interrupted, "I'll write you voluminous letters."

"There are things one doesn't care to put in letters," he reminded her.

That brought a sharp suspicion. Could the fact be a part of her plan?

"How overbearingly important you sound," she laughed.

"I've something really important to say," he urged. "Hal asked me to speak to you about it."

"Oh, Hal!" she jeered. "Tell me it over the 'phone, Nick."

"Rather less than in a letter," he objected. "Give me just a minute, Janet."

"Then this afternoon," she proposed indulgently.

"What time do you leave?"

She hesitated.

"I haven't the schedule. The car's to be hooked on some train this evening. They're to 'phone me. I hope to be cleared up between three and four. Bring your important communications some time after three. Does that satisfy you?"

"Doesn't it have to?" he asked.

But when he reached the Ashmead house at three Nicolas found Janet's preparations by no means cleared up. From above he received dilatory messages. Then the Warden sisters stormed in, blustery with excitement at Janet's sudden excursion, and at half after Mrs. Ashmead descended, hatted and cloaked, but looking hurriedly put together.

"Destructive, Janet's tearing off this way! Naturally it's a pleasant chance, but I'd rather not go at all than start a wreck."

Nicolas glanced from her to Sally and Ethel, striving to dismiss the evidence they offered, but at that moment Janet supplied the final, inescapable proof. She ran in, dressed for

outdoors, too; more than that, prepared for travel. She hurried to him breathlessly.

"You dear, patient Nick!"

"I suppose," he said, "I should be honoured to see you at all. When *does* your train leave?"

"It's shocking," she answered in her breathless manner. "Mr. Glendon has no consideration. He pushed things up. We leave at four o'clock. What time is it? Quick! We must dash. I'd feel a ninny to stand on the platform and see the train pull out."

She turned from Nicolas, and entered the front hall, calling to them to hurry. It was only on the sidewalk that he caught her, and whispered desperately:

"I must see you alone for a minute."

"Your important news!" she laughed. "I'd forgotten. But I'm not accountable. Maybe at the station."

She climbed in the car, and the others piled after. Nicolas had an instinct to refuse to join them. Since the revealing hour in Philadelphia his hot impulses sprang too easily to the surface, and he felt that Janet had deliberately outwitted him. It was only the possibility she offered, one that he might force her to give, that changed his mind, that set him in the crowded, noisy landaulet. But at the station what was to have been foreseen arranged itself with ponderous finality. Nicolas was flung into a throng of voyagers and leave-takers. They pounced upon Janet. They interposed over-dressed bodies, and a less conquerable wall of meaningless and hysterical talk.

At the last minute Janet leant from the car platform, and grasped Nicolas's hand. Her gloved fingers gave him an impression of real affection, and her eyes were serious as they looked into his.

"Too bad, Nick! Forgive me!"

The train started. She clung to his hand.

"Maybe it's just as well. Things of importance are sometimes better for keeping."

Mr. Glendon caught her by the shoulders and drew her back, laughing too unrestrainedly.

"These affianced ones! The train is stronger than love, Janet."

Her hand slipped, drawn, indeed, by the movement of the train from Nicolas, who stood still. As the car swung into the yards he caught a last glimpse of her hand, still waving an excited farewell

Nicolas went to his studio, raging at his powerlessness. Janet, her eyes open, had beaten him. He tried honestly not to be unjust. The memory of her clasp and the appeal in her eyes argued for her. His mother was probably right. Janet, granted her sophistication, might refuse to give any real body to what John had seen in Philadelphia; she might easily picture Nicolas as involved in a passing infatuation from which he would be bound to disentangle himself before long. In running away she unquestionably used her old tactics of making herself more desirable through denial. The longer she stayed, moreover, the more time she would fancy herself giving him to realize his folly. And there was nothing he could do. To write the facts to her would be a futility, since letters get lost, or can be said to have been lost. In addition such an attempt would be an impertinence, because she had indicated plainly enough she didn't care for his confession and wouldn't have it.

Although he remained bound to her by custom, morally to his mind not a single tie survived. As though to make sure he understood that he went to the telephone and called the Grantley apartment. He had hoped Eleanor might answer, but the sharp voice of the day before demanded his identity.

"I am Mr. Aldrich," he answered. "I was at the house yesterday. Might I speak to Miss Grantley?"

"I'm sorry," the glib answer came. "My daughter isn't in."

"Could you tell me," he asked, "the best time to catch her?"

"It's hard to say," the voice came back.

"I'll try later," he promised.

Three times during the evening he called and went through

a conversation that assumed the dreary routine of a formula. It was impossible to persist along that line. They had made it clear he was not to see or speak to Eleanor Grantley. He couldn't surrender so long as a single road to victory lay open. He wrote to her, describing the unforeseen barrier that had been constructed between them.

"If it is someone else who prevents my seeing you I should like to know it. If you, yourself, are taking such a stand, please give me one opportunity to prove to you how wrong and unfair it is. All I told you the other night has grown until I can think of nothing else."

He mailed the letter and counted the hours until he might have a reply.

Because of the strain at home he was seldom there these days except to sleep, but each time he saw his mother she mutely questioned him, and as voicelessly he told her there was nothing to tell. And the days dragged by until it became clear Eleanor Grantley wouldn't answer at all. Instead of angering him and bringing him to the frame of mind Janet hoped for, this protracted silence stimulated his imagination and his impatience. The night he unexpectedly ran into Beau Ashmead in the lower hall of the Aldrich house he threw caution to the winds.

He had changed and was coming down the stairs on his way out when he saw the door opened to admit the old man. What was he doing here? The fear of an unfriendly alliance between his mother and Beau Ashmead stung Nicolas's temper which each day seemed less easily controlled.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Mr. Ashmead."

The usual chuckle was a prelude to an unusual reprimand.

"I'm sometimes asked, Nick, to the very nicest houses."

Nicolas caught himself. The opportunity was too good to be lost through anger, nor did he care what he risked in order to use it.

"Whatever have you done with Miss Grantley, sir?"

"Done?" Beau Ashmead echoed, surrendering his coat and hat to Johnson.

Nicolas nodded.

"I wanted to see her the other day," he said baldly, "and I've telephoned. I'm only left the inference that the Grantley apartment's become a prison."

"Ever hear," the old man rattled, "of people who ask to go to gaol?"

Nicolas flushed. Then it was Eleanor Grantley's fault and she had meant every scornful phrase she had shot at him in Philadelphia.

"You admitted before you sent me to Philadelphia," he said uneasily, "that you owed her something."

"By substitution," Beau Ashmead corrected dryly.

"What I mean, sir, is," Nicolas went on, "I doubt if you would consider it payment to let her lock herself up."

Beau Ashmead drew back his bony shoulders.

"I've always been rather proud of my solvency. You'll have to wait to see how I pay, Nick. Can't pump me until the cash is in the bank."

The infused eyes narrowed.

"You don't look well, Nick. Look as though something'd disagreed with you. Can't stomach Janet's taking herself off this way?"

"Turn about!" Nicolas laughed uncomfortably.

The wrinkled face smiled benignantly.

"There, there. I won't pump you. Guess Johnson's done his job and I'm due. Sorry you're running off."

Nicolas, as he let himself out, was convinced Janet's grandfather had come for an intimate talk with Mrs. Aldrich. Suppose they were working together? Suppose he was responsible for the imprisonment of Eleanor Grantley? Hopes born of impulse vanish with calculation. Eleanor Grantley had insisted she didn't want to see him, and apparently she would see Driggs. He carried away only one certainty from the brief interview: Beau Ashmead was going to make it up to her, and in a manner

fitting the obligation; because, even after all these days, he hadn't yet got enough cash, as he put it, in the bank.

The Morleys were back in town, after visits on Long Island, and had an apartment in an uptown hotel. The afternoon after his meeting with Beau Ashmead Nicolas called, not from a sense of duty, rather driven by his restlessness. There might be some ease in chatting with Mary who was involved, very much as he was, reluctantly with the Ashmeads.

He was surprised to find her in the living-room alone, staring out at the park, where spring, as in a spirit of experimentation, was at its earliest colouring. She met him with a lack of ease he couldn't quite sound.

"Rest of the household's shopping," she said with an air of making talk.

She rang for tea, then returned to her place in the window and her contemplation of the park. Her attempts at conversation were sporadic, unconvincing. He disliked having Mary ill-at-ease with him. It must be because Hal had told her he had witnessed what had happened in Key West. He took her hand.

"See here. You're not going to have odd fancies and be disagreeable to me."

"What are you talking of, Nick?"

"Hal's told me you're letting things drift."

He was surprised at the genuineness of her mirth.

"Why not? Didn't I once tell you I was born for a drifter? One needn't decide anything in a rush. All the information I need for a decision has been given me. So why hurry?"

He looked at her closely.

"Mary! You're happy!"

"At least I'm not miserable," she smiled, "because this time I've not the merest idea where I'm drifting."

"You know everything," he said uneasily. "Even the name of—of—"

She helped him out.

"Rather! I knew that long before he came fearfully to tell me."

He recalled Eleanor Grantley's scornful reminder that women were invariably observant.

"Did you know," he asked wonderingly, "as far back as Hill's End?"

"I'd an idea," she confessed.

"Then your fine talk about the new freedom of women!" he teased her. "I believe now, Mary, you were only seeking emancipation from your own heart."

"I don't know," she mused.

"And," he asked, "if Hal hadn't come along like a frightened naughty boy——"

"I'd have stopped drifting in just this way," she said firmly. "Funny I find it so much pleasanter to drift, Nick."

She straightened, listening.

"Tea so soon?"

Nicolas followed her glance to the door of the private hall. He heard voices. He glanced up, holding his breath, caught by a rigid bewilderment. A hand drew the curtains aside. Eleanor Grantley walked gracefully through. Deferentially Driggs Wandel strode at her side.

XII

WHERE THE ROAD LED

BEAU Ashmead and Lady Mary followed Eleanor Grantley and Wandel in. The idea of those four excursioneering together stimulated Nicolas's surprise and increased his confusion. Janet's grandfather couldn't hide his disapproval at finding Nicolas in the room, and Wandel spoke sarcastically, lifting his eyebrows.

"How unexpected and delightful to run into genius!"

Eleanor Grantley paused, half turned as though to retreat, thought better of it, and came on to accept Nicolas's waiting hand. He pressed her fingers, his only means of reminding her of the secrets between them and of the pain her seclusion had caused; but she released herself immediately, and walked to a chair in a corner where she sat down, loosening her furs. The action brought a fresh bewilderment, drawing attention, as it did, to the rich plainness of her clothing—a simplicity achieved only in such shops as women of his own class patronized. Such an evolution, however, wasn't unnatural, since Beau Ashmead had probably handsomely increased Mr. Grantley's pension as an easy step toward settling his debt.

"What you doing here, Nick?" the ancient was rattling. "Painting business gone off as bad as everything else?"

"Why have you been such a recluse?" Lady Mary asked.

She attempted openly to ease the strain, clapping her hands and calling for tea.

"I've already," Mary said, "commanded huge quantities."

Nicolas glanced from her to Eleanor Grantley, inevitably comparing this juxtaposition with the one he had witnessed in

the library at Hill's End last Christmas Eve. Each picture had a trait in common—Eleanor's complete poise. She was, if anything, more at home here than she had been slaving over Mr. Ashmead's work; and to-day Mary was sufficiently aware of her presence to disapprove of Nicolas's intruding on a party that centred plainly about the former secretary. No one, in fact, had expected him or wanted him. But Driggs Wandel was welcome; had, probably, been asked. Doubtless it was what he had looked forward to when he had spoken the other night of seeing Eleanor Grantley soon. Why was he so glad to come? Because he treasured George Morton's advice? Nicolas was inclined to believe it as he watched the little man draw a chair close to Eleanor Grantley and bend confidentially over, talking to her in a low voice.

The entire situation took its key from that muttered conversation; was shadowed by its cloud of conspiracy. Was the induction of Eleanor Grantley into this company one of the coins with which Beau Ashmead sought to pay Hal's debt? Nicolas could understand Lady Mary's willingness to loan such currency. Beau Ashmead was her oldest friend, and more important than that was her almost certain knowledge of Hal's recklessness in Key West. She must realize, since Mary hadn't broken with him, the wisdom of letting Hal see the two women side by side. It furnished for him a test, and for Mary a skilful safeguard.

Beau Ashmead glided stiffly up.

"Seems the gaol's out," he sneered.

"Seems," Nicolas countered, "no one wished me to know it."

The bony grasp tightened on Nicolas's arm.

"You're too sensitive, Nick. You take a word of advice from a regular lady-killer. I mean it. You watch your step, young man. Don't you dare forget to look where you're going."

The tone rather than the words filled Nicolas with vague alarm. Did the old man mean to warn him away from Eleanor Grantley and toward Janet? Or did he call attention to his

sullen disapprobation and suspense that he had hoped were well concealed?

"I don't understand you, sir."

Beau Ashmead walked away without answering. With an effort Nicolas joined Mary, but her guilt, and his knowledge of it, made them less at ease than before the others' arrival. Once or twice he fancied her glancing comprehendingly at him; and he tried to keep his eyes on hers to avoid watching that tableau, remote from the others in the room, of Driggs Wandel bent over Eleanor Grantley, speaking so low she alone could hear.

At intervals Hal, Dicky Goodhue, and Jack Berry dropped in, carefully handpicked men, anxious to jump at Lady Mary's bidding. For that matter, most men were; but Nicolas smiled vindictively, knowing she wouldn't get women to trot to Eleanor Grantley. They could be made to stare at her only from a distance, suspiciously; at the most, with amusement.

He welcomed these reinforcements, nevertheless. Summoned by Lady Mary, they remained because of Eleanor Grantley—completely variant types brought to a similar enjoyment of her presence. They crowded around her, destroying Driggs's tête-à-tête, but Hal lingered only for a quick greeting before joining Mary in the window. Through the closing dusk his face was placid and utterly empty of the old hunger. As he responded serenely to Mary's welcoming smile Nicolas experienced a biting envy of Hal's capricious nature, yet wondered if his content could be accounted for through fickleness; if rather it hadn't sprung from a belated mental stabilization won from the shock of Eleanor Grantley's loss. Facing a similar deprivation Nicolas couldn't fancy himself ever finding ease again.

He was an intruder. Beau Ashmead had made that clear; Mary had let him see it, but he wouldn't be exiled. It was the first time he had seen Eleanor Grantley since he had left her in Philadelphia, and they all impressed him with the unlikelihood of his meeting her soon again. Stubbornly he joined the group about her. One of the servants, entering

with tea, turned on some lights. They brought to vivid life the dazzling radiance of her hair, but they shone also on the pallor of her face and the weariness in her eyes.

In order to remain near her at all he shared a trivial conversation. She spoke to him only when it couldn't be avoided, but his determination strengthened to remain until he might say a word to her alone.

The opportunity arrived sooner than he had hoped. Mary had called Dicky. Wandel and Berry were occupied at the tea table. Before Eleanor could escape, Nicolas, ignoring everyone else, sat in Wandel's chair.

"Why have you refused to see me, to talk to me, or to answer my letter?"

Her eyes wavered. He waited, knowing she wouldn't, for appearance' sake, leave him too abruptly.

"Really," he said earnestly, "I'd never imagined you wouldn't give me a chance to argue my case."

"You have no case," she murmured.

"If I catch your drift," he answered, "I may have one even there, after a fashion."

"What do you mean?"

He meant Janet's manoeuvre and the sense of moral release it had given him, but he couldn't speak of it here.

"To tell you, I must be alone with you," he said. "In a moment we will be interrupted."

She sighed.

"Don't you think this useless and unkind, Mr. Aldrich?"

"For me," he said tensely, "everything promises to turn useless without you."

She looked down.

"I can't take you seriously."

"It is serious."

"If it were," she said, mimicking a smile, "I would have to tell you what I did in Philadelphia. But I shall try to forget how you informed me of this—this infatuation. It will soon die."

"You know you're unjust," he said, "when you talk of in-

fatuation. I wonder everyone in the room doesn't see what I can't hide from you."

She started to rise. He stopped her.

"Don't go. You can't rob me of this minute, at least."

Her smile was artificial, unlike any expression he had ever seen in her face before. It was as if she sought coldly and deliberately to punish him.

"All this!" she mocked, indicating the room and its occupants. "I'm afraid it impresses you. It doesn't me. It won't last, so I submit to save endless argument. I don't belong here any more than I did on the houseboat or at Hill's End."

"People seem to think you do," he said sullenly.

"Men," she laughed. "Or at best I'm a curiosity."

"Why are you here?" he asked.

Her voice was bitter.

"I—I don't know. I—think I'm a sort of companion. I mean—I haven't really changed from the dreadful creature Mr. Wandel described."

His temper blazed.

"After that why are you so deuced friendly with him? Is it because of him you won't see me, don't give a hang for me, try to make me smart when I can't help letting you know how you fill my mind?"

There was plenty of animation in her face now.

"You're never tired of humiliating me," she said. "You must realize I don't care for you, Mr. Aldrich; and in a little while you'll find you never cared for me. Then you'll thank me——"

"You don't believe a word of that!"

"Whether I do or not," she said, "I have a right to ask you to stop this—this persecution."

With a hot rush there swept over him a more thorough comprehension of John's persistence. The fortunately placed Nicolas Aldrich, like John, or Hal, for that matter, was incapable of accepting with equanimity, according to the ritual, Eleanor Grantley's dismissal. He didn't care that his face should disclose his resistance, his savage stubbornness.

"You can't make me give up until I've had a real chance. Let me see you alone."

"I won't, I won't," she said. "Evidently you haven't the slightest regret for the last time you saw me alone."

Before he could form a defense, Driggs Wandel, as if with a definite purpose to interrupt, briskly joined them, bearing a cup of tea.

"It's the way you like it," he said with a familiar and gallant air, offering it to Eleanor Grantley.

She took the cup and placed it on a table at her side. She turned to Nicolas.

"I'm sorry you're running away."

He held himself in check and bowed.

"It's really too bad I must."

He managed polite farewells, got out of the room, found himself in Fifth Avenue, turned east, and wandered through home-hurrying workers until the streets were nearly empty. Long after that he continued walking without aim, trying to control the raw agony of his impotence, recalling that other night when he had strayed through sombre, rain-soaked streets in Philadelphia. He felt himself the victim of a monstrous injustice that he should have been permitted to find his essential self then only to have torn from him since every benefit of that breathless discovery.

"Beau Ashmead was here last night."

"I met him downstairs, sir."

It was late. Nicolas had returned home from his futile strayings, and Mr. Aldrich had called him to the library. At his entrance Mrs. Aldrich, who sat opposite her husband, appraised him with quick concern. But Nicolas was caught by his father's tone, sharp and disapproving. Then Janet's grandfather had come actually to make trouble.

He tried to steady himself. He lighted a cigarette.

"Was surprised to see him," he said. "He hasn't been often here."

"He's often enough been asked," Mrs. Aldrich put in quietly.

"This time he telephoned and said he would like to dine if we thought we could survive him."

"I see," Nicolas said dryly. "A special errand."

"I'd scarcely call it that," Mr. Aldrich objected. "He did mention at dinner—and that's what I wanted to ask you about, Nicolas—he was afraid you didn't care for Janet as you should——"

From beneath their heavy gray brows Mr. Aldrich's eyes asked for a denial. Nicolas shrugged his shoulders.

"Seems to me that's rather her father's job."

"Outside the office," Mr. Aldrich said, "he does and thinks as the ladies of his family tell him. One might say he sees only through their eyes. Curiously, it's frequently the case with apparent egoists."

"There's nothing apparent about his father's self-conceit," Nicolas scoffed.

"But of course it isn't true, Nicolas," Mr. Aldrich said anxiously.

He hurried on with an air of preventing his son's destroying his last illusion.

"Your mother has an absurd idea it may be."

Nicolas looked down.

"It's quite true, sir."

Mr. Aldrich pulled at the ribbon of his glasses. During several moments no one spoke—time enough for Nicolas to experience a sound sympathy for his father, to appreciate that sooner or later everyone must bow his head to the crumbling of cherished hopes. Just now Mr. Aldrich was more the victim of his failure than he had been since hearing of his son's engagement.

"But Janet doesn't know?" he asked at last fearfully.

"I think Janet knows," Nicolas answered.

"And what does she say?"

"Janet says nothing," Mrs. Aldrich interposed, "and she's gone away."

Mr. Aldrich stood up, walked to the fireplace, and held his hands to the heat.

"That must mean she still cares for you, Nicolas," he said gropingly.

Mrs. Aldrich went to her husband's side. To Nicolas the movement was like a conjunction of forces against him.

"Ethically there's no question of the heart," she said. "If Janet still wants him——"

"Mother!" Nicolas cried. "That isn't fair."

"It's what's fair to Janet you must think of," Mr. Aldrich muttered.

He recovered some of his false forcefulness.

"What's changed you Nicolas? You're not under the spell of another lady?"

Then Mr. Aldrich really knew nothing. Beau Ashmead, in his presence at least, had limited his criticisms. Yet Nicolas was willing to swear he had managed a word alone with Mrs. Aldrich. Certainly he wouldn't have taken all that trouble merely to put a flea in the Aldriches' ears.

"Why don't you answer?"

Nicolas looked up, his insubordination complete.

"Because, sir, Janet and her parents alone have the right to ask such questions; since they've shown plainly enough they don't care to——"

Mr. Aldrich stuttered, lost apparently the offence to himself in the implications of Nicolas's revolt.

"Since they don't care to, there's nothing you can say to them."

Nicolas laughed shortly.

"Apparently not."

"And," his father hurried on, "the old man mentioned Janet was planning the wedding for two months from now. How long will she be away?"

"A month, I gather," Nicolas answered indifferently.

Mr. Aldrich sighed.

"Time enough for you to come to your senses. We should thank the Ashmeads for their lenity. Or, in spite of what you think, Janet doesn't know. It is your task to see she never guesses. To treat her shabbily would make a pretty record."

Even his mother had to back Nicolas there.

"Janet's not blind," she said, "nor am I too modest to understand how she might cling to the thought of marrying our son."

"One wonders why," Nicolas sneered.

"There are sufficient reasons, my boy," she answered gravely. "And in your own dear self are others that would impress most women."

The worshipful prejudice failed to soften him. He turned on his heel.

"If you'll excuse me, I am tired. I should like to go to bed."

His father nodded. After stating the position of the Ashmeads and the Aldriches there was properly nothing left for him to say. Mrs. Aldrich, however, followed to the door.

"Nicolas, you look positively ill."

"Yet I'm not," he protested.

He bent as if to kiss her, and whispered in her ear:

"Let me speak to you."

She walked with him to the hall.

"What did old Mr. Ashmead want here last night?" he asked. "More than to raise this tempest?"

"What more should he want?"

"Don't evade, Mother. He spoke to you alone. Did you send for him?"

"I did not, Nicolas."

"Did he speak to you alone?"

"Yes," she answered uneasily. "What of it?"

"I can't answer that unless you tell me what he said."

She drew back, penitence in her glance.

"I can't just now."

"For expediency, or because he made you promise?" Nicolas asked.

"No matter," she said.

"He talked," Nicolas charged, "of Janet and Miss Grantley and me."

"I've told you I'd rather not discuss it," she reproved him,

"And I can't bear the thought," he answered, "of your joining with the Ashmeads against me. And it's a waste of hatred and a waste of affection."

Her voice was anxious.

"How?"

He leant against the banister, completely captured by his disillusionment and his exhaustion.

"Because," he said dully, "you can't do anything for or against me."

"Then you've seen her?" his mother asked quickly.

"This afternoon."

"Where?"

"By chance," he answered, "at Aunt Mary's, of all places. Evidently she's given her work as companion or secretary or something. Perhaps Mr. Ashmead told you that was on the carpet?"

She gave no sign, seemed waiting with a dominant suspense for his recital of what had been said.

"It's only that she isn't clever. She's been truthful all along. She's forbidden me to try to see her again. I tell you she won't have it. If I didn't think there was someone else she does care for——"

With both hands he clenched the banisters to steady himself. With a rush of nostalgic depression he recalled the moment Eleanor Grantley and he had stood side by side on the observation platform, grasping the railing while they had looked back at the rioting night. If only he had been wide awake enough then, far enough from his dazzling background to read his heart! His eyes had got their focus too late.

He felt his mother's arms around him, her tear-wet face pressed to his. The shock, the blame, the distrust of the past days were washed away. He might have been her baby, caught again after all these years to her anxious breast. "I'm so sorry." And, although it was her own voice that wavered: "My boy mustn't cry."

"I wish I could," he said spiritlessly. "And I wish you wouldn't. It's just a thing tears can't help."

To Nicolas's mind the studio had become merely four secretive walls within which to conquer his sense of loss. He made himself go there the following afternoon. With the gestures of a man under repulsive discipline he put on a smock, took up his brushes, and straggled through the motions of work; but his mind wouldn't be distracted. It followed its old bitter channels. In spite of his will he found himself back at the task of many months ago, sketching in Eleanor Grantley's outline and colouring; and as he examined the random, unwilling strokes he suffered a new excitation, realizing that the urge to carry through his old idealistic conception of her was dead. More and more triumphantly she placed herself in his mind as a body sought rather than one seeking; as a woman desired concretely rather than one desiring illusory benefits. The garment of his depression enclosed him in sombre folds.

As the light faded upon his futile efforts, he sat on a divan, smothered, no longer able to struggle.

He had no idea how long his surrender lasted. His head remained bowed on his folded arms. The studio grew cold. The light, when he glanced up, was pallid, so that objects across the room were already indistinct. Vaguely he understood there was someone on the stairs, and was annoyed, since people were supposed to ring. His disapproval was replaced by a dull curiosity, because about this ascent was a suggestion of stealth. Would Beau Ashmead have the nerve to spy on him after the damage he had done?

He called with open hostility:

"Who's there?"

No answer. He thought the furtive movements had ceased, but the studio was so quiet he caught from the well of the stairs the sibilation of hushed breathing.

He stood up, was halfway across the floor, when the movement recommenced. He paused and waited, informed through a startled instinct that it was a woman who climbed, one who came with clandestine caution, a retarding fear.

"Who's there?" he asked again in a lower, puzzled voice.

There was a feathered hat within view now, and the knowledge that it was visible must have hurried its wearer, for she came quickly up.

Dull as the light was Nicolas caught the glow of ruddy hair, the pallor of a face, the unforgettable lines of a figure. He waited, dumb, immovable.

She was at the head of the stairs now, facing him uncertainly; her hands clasped, her eyes fixed on visions beyond her power to outline. Her pose had for him the quality of a rebuke; but all his mind could compass at first was the inexplicable, the intoxicating reality of her presence alone with him in a darkening room. He shook off the bonds of his amazement.

"There's no one with you?"

Her head moved negatively. Her shoulders shook, the same tremor he had noticed before when she had denied caring for him. She came forward as slowly and stealthily as she had climbed the stairs. He saw her hands unclasping and groping for his. They were warm, and their grasp tight. He stared hungrily at her wistful face. Her eyes no longer concealed any secrets, meant him to see all she thought. He freed his hands, raised his arms, and crushed her. How fragile her body was! Half-remembered warnings coursed through his mind. What had his mother said; Beau Ashmead? But how could a man think of anything but her lips, for now her eyes were shut. He bent and touched her mouth. Warnings fled. Thought died. He swayed in a black void that he imagined was content at last, because it was formless, obliterating, and without visible boundaries.

Sharply she drew him back, freeing her lips, hiding them against his shoulder. He saw now that she wore a heavy veil which had been raised about her hat-brim. It informed him she hadn't been ignorant of the implications of her coming to him alone; and he guessed that the veil had been lifted on the stairs in preparation for her undreamed-of surrender. He gazed tenderly at the ruddy hair that escaped from beneath the veil and her hat, blaming himself for having accepted such

a gift unthinkingly and selfishly. With an effort he subordinated his dizzy happiness to her necessity.

"You shouldn't have come here alone."

Without looking up she answered, her voice muffled by his coat:

"You're not scolding me for coming to you!"

"God knows I'm glad, Eleanor. After last night and to-day. But I know I ought not to be glad."

"I'm not ashamed," she said in that same choked tone.

He tried to raise her head.

"Yet you won't look at me."

"I can't," she whispered, "until I—I make you understand."

He sighed, overcame the temptation of forcibly seeking her lips again, and urged her nervously to go.

"You've told me you didn't mean the things you said yesterday and in Philadelphia. Bless you! But you must run away. Probably no one saw you. I'll call to-morrow."

Suddenly she lifted her head, exposing her flushed face, her sparkling eyes.

"I am going to call you Nicolas," she cried, "so I can tell you it's you who are ashamed."

He stooped swiftly to touch her lips again, but she avoided his mouth, pushing him away, shaking her head.

"Please, not now."

"It's my only chance," he said hoarsely, "because you must go. There are too many reasons for your not staying."

She nodded.

"I know. I've tried not to think of her. They've talked about you and her a lot up there, to warn me, I suppose, and—and kill my silly notions; for they've all suspected."

Her voice shook.

"They saw through me, if you didn't. And she makes no difference; oughtn't to; for she doesn't change what you are, or what I am. That became clear after you left last evening when I—I made up my mind I couldn't let you suffer any more."

He barely heard her now.

"When I knew I couldn't suffer any more myself. For I believe you do love me, Nicolas, after a fashion; and I—I love you after every fashion."

Yet she continued to hold him away, went on with an air of bewilderment.

"And you think it wrong I should come and tell you so."

While he stared at her, struggling again to cling to his moorings, the divination of his mother and Beau Ashmead's cynical wisdom became all at once crystal clear. His mother, without ever having seen Eleanor Grantley, had visualized the only type capable of altering him so radically; and Beau Ashmead, knowing her, had foreseen her eventual surrender to the one course she would imagine just to the man she loved. There was no doubt. Each had meant to warn him. "Promise to do nothing," his mother had said. "Watch your step," Beau Ashmead had rattled. Without confidence they had placed her really impulsive soul in his hands.

So he released her.

"Come over here," he said. "Sit down. We can talk for a minute."

She followed him to the divan. The studio was nearly dark. The great light had become a pallid patch above their heads. Almost fearfully he took her hand. Her quick yielding was another safeguard. Her long fingers, confidently clasping his, were a protection for her lips. Unconsciously they outlined for him a substantial, more necessary apprehension of content as a twilit, easily bounded, undisturbed place in which one above all else remained steadfast.

"It's no harm," he said as if to assure himself. "It will be safer for you to go when it is quite dark."

He pressed her hand, laughing happily.

"You who couldn't bear to have a man touch you!"

She returned his pressure.

"Hush!"

"Why did you lie to me in Philadelphia, Eleanor? Why did you try to destroy me yesterday?"

Her eyes half closed.

"Hadn't I a right to think of myself? It was only when I came here that I stopped doing that."

"You didn't trust me?" he asked breathlessly. "What did you think?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't know. I hoped for this, to sit in the dusk, close to you, to trust you."

She rested her head against his shoulder.

"Yet," he said, "you came without knowing."

"I had to come," she whispered. "It made no difference."

"And it's sweet to have you this way," he murmured; "sweet but dangerous, and really unnecessary. You'd only to drop your conscientious masquerade, to say or write one word. We could have waited then as we're going to wait now."

She looked at him, surprised.

"Wait! For what? I haven't made you understand."

"For our marriage," he answered simply. "You know I'm still under an obligation, but I've done what I could to escape it, and I will."

Recalled too painfully to his chafing enchainment, he dropped her hand, stood up, and paced the floor. Through the dusk her troubled glance followed his movements.

"That's certain," he said uneasily, "to arrange itself. The moment she returns I'll tell her everything."

"You must realize, dear," she said wistfully, "she makes no real difference. She hasn't really anything to do with it."

He paused and looked down at her.

"Everything," he answered. "The moment it's arranged you will marry me."

She hid her face in her hands.

"Don't look at me that way. I can't marry you. I can't. I can't. Anyway, it won't be arranged. I can guess how a woman wouldn't want to let you go. Don't let's talk of it."

"What nonsense!" he said. "If you make me, I'll talk you into marrying me."

"I'll never do it," she said firmly, her face still hidden.

"Why not?"

"Because I hope I care too much for you."

"Look at me!" he commanded.

She obeyed, and he made a careless, dismissing gesture. He laughed at her. But in his heart he knew she was desperately in earnest. Her coming to him as she had proved it.

"Don't tell me you're still brooding over that rot of Driggs's."

"It wasn't rot," she said mechanically, "because, although he said it, you thought it. I tell you I saw it in your face."

"You didn't!" he cried. "You saw my reaction to the shabby show Hal was giving Mary."

He looked down.

"And—and, Eleanor, I realize now I was jealous."

She laughed on a regretful, desolate note.

"Now! You couldn't possibly dream you were jealous then! It proves every word Mr. Wandel said was true. It proves you agreed with him. It proves I was making an impossible marriage. Would one with you be less impossible?"

He tried to break from the trammels of her logic.

"That's why you treated me like a beast yesterday when you were really sorry for me? See here, you most precious of beings, you're not trying to say you think me too good for you?"

Her smile was a caress.

"No; only that everyone else would know you were."

He studied her moodily, seeking arguments. The avidity of the first moments of her arrival was quite dead, a shameful memory. Gad! How such a woman could rise above the physical, placing about herself, naively and without effort, inviolable defenses! And there slipped into his mind the figure he had so often used in thinking of her: a ship tossing on an unnavigable sea; yet here she was alone with him, safe from his social cynicism because she dared sail a straighter course than he.

Without doubt of himself or of her misunderstanding he sat beside her again, put his arms around her, and drew her head back to his shoulder. His heart leapt at her response, unresisting, unafraid.

"Now we'll talk of facts," he said scornfully. "It won't go, dear, for that isn't the reason you dished Hal."

Her voice was hard with the suffering Hal had caused her.

"No. He never let me have many scruples about him. Instead he made me want to punish him. I think that's one reason I went as far as I did; thought I could go the whole way."

He recalled Hal's brutality on the pond, and in the library at Hill's End. It made him regret his own savage boast in Philadelphia that he would take her in any way he could. Aiming at honesty then, he realized now how fraudulent he had actually been; how his unconscious trickery might be responsible for her coming as she had to-day.

"You can't draw comparisons," she went on softly. "We really care, you and I. It's why I'm here."

He held her away, looking at her eyes that tried to keep nothing concealed.

"And how long have you cared? Did you care then? Had that anything to do with you throwing him over?"

As he waited for her to answer he felt himself at the commencement of the hidden road she had followed. Surely she wouldn't keep its signpost secret any longer.

"Come!" he urged. "You're not ashamed to tell me?"

Her eyes continued to meet his, unabashed.

"It isn't that," she said reflectively.

She smiled.

"It might make it easier if you told me first when you began to care."

"I can't," he admitted, "because I suspect now I loved you and wanted you from the very first without being able to realize it."

She nodded comprehendingly.

"It makes me happy to think it was that way with both of us. You may laugh, but I do remember you distinctly that first night of all."

"The night I ran into you in the arbour," he answered, "when you were with John. But you didn't see me then. Thank the Lord for that eavesdropping! I know. It was in the Ashmead conservatory, from your room over the garage."

She ceased to meet his eyes. There was too much colour in her face.

"That dreadful night! I thought you'd caught me watching. I had no business to do it, but I'd listened too long to Mother's complaints of her vanished glories. You mustn't think she hadn't had them, dear; for I wasn't too young not to remember an extravagant house, extravagant servants, extravagant presents, extravagant love and ambition for me from my poor father—everything on too huge a scale for his income. It's his tragedy, that idea of giving me more than he could afford, of turning quite a lot of money into a great deal just so his only child could set the world on fire. It's laughable, isn't it, when you think what it came to?"

"There never was a man," he smiled, "who would speculate more hopefully and less wisely. And I know he got back to you that night. I saw him in the garage. It must have been a shock."

"I'm ashamed that it was," she said.

She hesitated, turned back to him appealingly.

"Please don't think I'm making excuses."

"I'm thinking it was a mistake, your mother's ever coming to New York," he said softly.

She brightened.

"That's because you don't know the inconsistency of such a mother. Her family had nothing but pride, and my father's hadn't any use for spendthrifts. She wanted to get as far away as she could from everyone who knew. And I didn't have such a bad time with public school and even afterward, except that I read too many books, waiting day after day all alone for Mother to come home. Books are bad when you're poor; they make you think too much of what you're missing."

"I dare say the conservatory added to that with a vengeance," he said dryly. "If you want proof of how wrong you were, you'll tell me you looked on me with envy, and I'll tell you I wasn't exactly to be envied that night. Gad, what a mood I was in!"

He smiled.

"But we're honest now. What did you think of me, dear?"

"How could I think of you at all," she laughed tremulously, "when I was a beggar gazing at plenty? I can't help it. I did think of you as the sort of man a girl fortunate enough to have a choice would like to marry."

"I'm going to kiss you," he said, "for laughing at me."

Trustingly she offered her lips, and he brushed them with his. His hands tightened on her shoulders.

"You don't mind my kissing you, Eleanor?"

"No. Why should I?"

But he wouldn't touch her lips again. In an effort to forget them he asked the first questions that came to his mind.

"Did you get much that was encouraging out of the conservatory? Daresay it made you feel you had to escape the garage, and John, and any more retrogression, didn't it? Come, now. What did you want in their place? What road did you take? What was your very first signpost? See here. You're blushing! Look at me, and own up. What was that first signpost?"

"Must I be honest, Nicolas?"

"Can't fancy you anything else, and I don't see why you don't want to be. What was it?"

"What I saw in my mirror after I'd looked at you as long as I dared."

He shook her a trifle.

"And I never dreamed you were vain."

"It wasn't vanity," she answered seriously. "It was a desperate attempt to add up my stock in trade; and now you know what the conservatory did to me."

"You thought your stock in trade enough to carry you there. And you were right."

"Since you call me vain," she murmured, "I did think it enough, provided I could make myself seen at all, for a man like you to waste a glance on."

"This is confession!"

"I mean it to be," she answered seriously. "I mean you to

know I've always been the designing creature you and Mr. Wandel thought me."

He drew her closer in an access of happiness. He glanced back along her road at whose summit, though she hadn't for a long time known it, he had always stood.

"Designing!" he scoffed. "Scarcely that when you threw your stock in trade away by coming here to-day."

Vehemently she shook her head.

"I've thrown nothing away. I've given. That's all I could ever do with you, dear. And it puts me at peace for the first time since that night; for while I looked in my glass then I couldn't imagine ever throwing away or giving."

With a motion of distaste she tried to free herself.

"I could only dream of selling, and I wasn't going to let anything impulsive cheapen my stock in trade."

"Yet you have. Why?" he asked.

She relaxed again in his arms.

"Because I've learned that the things one misses are more than the Ashmead conservatory made me think of."

"What then?"

For the first time her arms stole about his neck.

"This," she whispered. "And last night it came to me what a coward I was to try to kill so sacred a thing through fear, through prejudice. It came to me in the dark that there's nothing in the world good enough to justify it, because there's nothing in the world so precious."

"Why," he asked softly, feeling her wet cheek against his, "should that make you cry?"

"I don't know. I never thought getting what you want could bring tears."

"It's because of Hal," he said bitterly. "I suppose it was natural enough, but I wish you'd never gone near Ashmead and Warden's."

She shook her head.

"I'm glad I did. Hal did me no harm. Instead he brought me to you."

She pressed her wet cheek closer to his.

"Why is it?" she wondered. "I despised Hal when he wanted such things; and I know now I could never have given them to him."

"Then why did you agree to marry him?"

"That night on the island," she answered reluctantly, "it seemed the only success I was ever likely to get, for I thought you only saw me as someone way down in the valley."

"All the more reason for not funk'ing it," he pointed out, "although I thank God you did. Was it that dismal bell that changed your mind, or the church, or the way it was being done?"

Her reply was barely audible.

"It was you, Nicolas. You don't think a marriage would have made anything decenter. So I ran away. Although I thought you'd never know anything about it, it came over me then I had to keep myself unashamed for you."

After a moment she spoke, on an undertone again:

"And I was right, for I feel no shame with you. Why is that, dear?"

"Just because," he said, "you are going to marry me, and you know it, the moment things are straightened out."

Forcibly she freed herself from his grasp and sprang erect. Against the faint gray of the north light she made him think of her silhouette as she had hesitated in the arbour entrance. Now as then she was angry, and because a man again urged her to marry.

"Why won't you understand?" she cried. "I had no scruples about pulling Hal down to disillusionment and exile. That's true enough. But I can't do it to you. If love pulled down it would turn to something—revolting. I tell you I'm unchanged. Your aunt pays me. I'm a charitable eccentricity of hers and old Mr. Ashmead's. I've submitted for his sake, because it seemed to mean so much to him. Do you know what people would say if we married? That your family, through the Morleys and their title, were trying to put the best face on an awfully bad job. I couldn't bear it for either of us. If I did you'd hate me for it sooner or later."

The statement of her sacrificial beliefs strengthened his determination to take the only fair way out.

"Please do you understand, Eleanor," he said, "that I'd rather run along to slums with you—if that's the way you feel about it—than hang around palaces where you didn't wear purple. The palaces seem to have lost their meaning, anyway, since I've learned I'm quite like other men, even the demonstrative John. I've realized that living with backgrounds alone is a dreamy, endless excursion among unsubstantial things—really the ghosts of departed people's thoughts and energies. Please pull me out of that to some solider country where work and love are the backgrounds. Will you, dear? And it needn't quite come to slums, just because of the work. I'm as poor as Job, but we can do since you don't hanker, either, any more for the palaces. Hurrah! You can't fancy the joyous prospect, Eleanor, of being frankly, uproariously just off indigence. Hitherto it's been a skeleton in our house."

But she wouldn't respond to his mood.

"Let us be happy," she begged, "until—she—comes back."

"Then?" he scoffed.

"We mustn't think of that," she whispered. "You need never think of it."

He sprang up, alarmed, and caught her in his arms. It was she who placed her lips against his, but he recognized their intention of farewell.

"I must go now."

He nodded.

"I've made you stay too long. It's quite night. Put your veil down. Be careful, dear."

"I'm not ashamed," she repeated. "When shall I come again? It makes you happy to have me? But we mustn't always argue over riddles to which we have the answer."

He broke at once into half-angry argument.

"You mustn't come this way again. I'll see you at——"

He paused. Steps echoed in the alley. Gad! How inconvenient if any one should drop in—Driggs or Hal, for example! But surely it was too late for that.

"What is it?" she asked.

"There's someone in the alley," he whispered, "stopping by my door."

"They'll come in——" she began.

"Not without ringing," he said. "Perhaps I shall have to hide you as you wanted to hide me."

"I'd rather not hide——"

"Then, if they ring, stay here. I'll take whoever it is in the room downstairs and close the door. You can slip out——"

No one had rung, and too late he knew the reason. As Eleanor Grantley had done, this visitor had shirked a refusal of admittance. The draught from the open alley door came with a chill rush up the stairs. Momentarily he held his breath and closed his eyes, for his mother's voice, clear and anxious, came from the hall.

"Nicolas!"

And after a second: -

"You see he isn't here, as I told you."

Eleanor stirred.

"Who is it?"

"My mother."

She continued to rest trustfully in his arms, although she must have guessed he could never justify her presence to his mother. And now he knew Beau Ashmead was with Mrs. Aldrich. The cracked voice rattled through the stair-well.

"Nick! Nick!"

Perhaps silence would be saving; but the shrewd old man destroyed that hope. Spurred by his suspicions he climbed the stairs, calling back:

"I'll go up if I break my neck. Why do you suppose the door was unlocked?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Aldrich answered, "but you're wrong. I tell you you're wrong."

There was no possible hiding place up here, and the stumping feet were nearer.

Nicolas took his arms from Eleanor and hurried to the head of the stairs.

"What's the invasion?"

He was aware that his attempt to make his voice casual had failed.

"Told you so," came the querulous reply. "Why didn't you answer in the first place? Why is it dark as Egypt?"

"Maybe I've been dozing," Nicolas answered.

"Then," Beau Ashmead demanded, "why don't you make a light now?"

"Because I'm coming right down," Nicolas said. "Did I hear Mother?"

"She's alive," Beau Ashmead jeered, "so it couldn't have been her ghost."

His bony hand caught Nicolas as he tried to descend. His voice went to a hoarse whisper:

"You're not going down. I'm coming up."

"If I don't want you to! Why?"

"Because I want to know what kind of a fool you've made of yourself and everyone else."

His reply held rather more misgiving and pain than anger. From the foot of the stairs Mrs. Aldrich spoke uncertainly:

"What is it, Nicolas? What are you two talking about?"

"Nicolas doesn't want to let me up," the old man complained.

"You must, Nicolas. Why shouldn't you?"

He threw himself on Beau Ashmead's mercy.

"She mustn't come up here. Do you understand?"

Beau Ashmead leant suddenly against the wall.

"I understand."

Then he cried out in broken tones:

"Puppies using their teeth in the dark!"

From across the room Eleanor Grantley spoke with her old impassivity:

"If you think that you'd better come up, Mr. Ashmead."

"Who is it?" Mrs. Aldrich called sharply.

Nicolas stepped aside. There was no defense left now.

"It's just as I feared," Beau Ashmead said.

He started across the floor.

"Where are you, Eleanor? Why did you come here? I was an idiot to think Nicolas more of a man than my grandson. All this new generation is alike."

Eleanor, beneath the skylight, was barely discernible. Her reply seemed detached; an embodiment of all the sacrifice she had shown herself capable of.

"You mustn't think he asked me to come, Mr. Ashmead. I stayed against his will. And I'm glad."

Mrs. Aldrich groped her way up.

"We must have a light," she said harshly. "Nicolas! Will you make a light?"

"Better not," Beau Ashmead grumbled.

"Turn on the light," Eleanor Grantley said firmly. "I want to go."

Reluctantly Nicolas found the switch and snapped it. During a moment the abrupt illumination dazed them all. Then Nicolas saw his mother walking straight toward Eleanor Grantley who stood by the divan, erect, motionless, undisturbed.

For a long time the older woman stared at the large, wide eyes that had quite lost their inscrutability. Nicolas, not understanding its purpose, resented that cruel appraisal, was about to stop it, when his mother unexpectedly stretched out her hands to the girl and spoke in a satisfied voice:

"You will come with me back to Lady Mary."

She glanced at the others.

"There's really no point in anybody else knowing she's been here."

Her voice warmed.

"Good boy, Nick!"

Eleanor hesitated.

"Go with her," Nicolas said. "And no matter what any one says, don't forget what your visit's meant to me."

As she passed him she nodded confidently and smiled.

When the alley door had closed Nicolas turned on Beau Ashmead.

"Why don't you go with them, sir? I'm tired of being pursued. You've raised a pretty rumpus. What earthly excuse

had you for thinking she was here; or, thinking it, for bringing my mother?"

The ancestor grinned uncomfortably.

"Go ahead, Nick. Clear it out of your system. If people didn't imagine they could get away with murder there'd be no hangings."

"You know," Nicolas said bluntly, "I want to get away with nothing beyond a marriage with her. There's Janet, and there's Eleanor. She's an idea she'd pull me down, as if such a woman could. And you've got to realize her being alone with me hasn't changed anything——"

Beau Ashmead chuckled.

"Since your mother believes that so do I. But I had a start! Good thing my heart's so sound for my age."

"What made you think she was here?" Nicolas asked.

"Because," the old man grinned, "I've known for a long time you oughtn't to be trusted together. If I'd ever had any doubts, that night in Philadelphia would have settled them. That's why I tried to help her keep away from you until things were straightened out. I didn't want you making any mistakes like Hal's. And I knew how women who love like that can give. See here, Nick. Don't be hard on me. I did it for your good and hers; and I thought I'd failed when I didn't find her at Mary's awhile ago, because Mary told me how she'd been acting, and how she'd slipped away without saying anything. I knew that was the way she'd go to you and to nobody else."

But Nicolas wasn't appeased.

"Why did you take my mother to Lady Mary's?" he demanded.

The infused eyes grew shrewder.

"'Cause night before last we agreed she'd better have a look at this gel who'd got you in her scheming toils."

Nicolas flushed.

"I'm sorry, sir. I never guessed."

"I suspected," the old man grinned, "you hadn't read my visit to your house just right. I've only wanted to help you, Nick. Not for your sake. Why should I bother about that?"

Just for hers. And do you care for her, more than for life or death or those hanged sight more important appearances you've been raised to worship? You'd drop everything, even Janet, if Eleanor would have you?"

"If I had the chance," Nicolas muttered.

The thin lips curved in a comprehending smile.

"You've earned it this afternoon," Beau Ashmead said.

"Don't forget I've found out you can sacrifice, too."

He walked stiffly to the stairs, as though everything had been said. Nicolas gazed after him.

"But I don't see what you mean, sir."

The old man turned and pointed his cane.

"I mean, Nick, you're going away for a few days. Virginia Springs, Pinehurst, anywheres you want, as long as you keep off my map and give me a chance."

"But Janet?" Nicolas asked under his breath.

The old man's laugh was grim.

"Janet! While you're away Janet will fly straight home. I'm still enough the head of my house to see to that."

Janet's expected letter reached Nicolas while he was at White Sulphur.

"I've just learned," it ran, "of grandad's dotage and Lady Mary's most curious hospitality. They place your foibles, dear man, on an entirely different plane. You'll appreciate, I'm certain, why I couldn't take them very seriously before. Now I must ask for a free foot. Nick, I do want to get out of what I realize was a mistake from the beginning. Have I the right to face old-maidhood? Please say yes. I insist on it."

Toward the end there was a softening, a touch of confession, and a hint of repentance that recalled the likable girl of their youth.

"I knew all along, Nick, you really never cared enough. I didn't either in the way I suppose one should. I let us both

in for it because it seemed so sensible. I'd an idea I needed you, and I knew you needed me, or what I could bring you. And in self-defense I want you to believe I thought I could make you happy. I've always been fond of you, always will be."

But, for valedictory, a swing back to the faulty, post-war Janet.

"So fond that I hate to see you making such a dismal mistake; so fond that it hurts my conscience not to go on keeping you from it. Never mind. It's too late now; and by and by we'll be good friends again."

After reading that, indeed, he felt friendlier with Janet than he had for months. She would marry well enough. There was nothing to worry about there.

Eleanor Grantley offered the problem that vexed and frightened him while he counted the minutes in his unbearable exile. Beau Ashmead had had plenty of time. He had overthrown one impediment, but evidently he lacked the strength to conquer more difficult ones. After hearing from Janet it became impossible for Nicolas any longer to keep his hands from that task, so he telegraphed the old man, withdrawing his parole.

From the moment he left the train in New York he felt himself an intruder, and he experienced a fear that he had compromised his own hopes of success. When he reached the house he found his father and mother out—at a *matinée*, Johnson told him. He lounged in front of the library fire, awaiting their return with a good deal of apprehension, but through their happy greeting he read his father's continued ignorance. Then he pricked up his ears, for Mr. Aldrich, surprisingly, had mentioned Eleanor Grantley, was asking his son if he had ever met her.

Nicolas nodded.

The affirmation failed to arouse the surprise it should have, but his mother explained quietly that someone had given Lady Mary a box again, and the party had really been for Eleanor.

So, Nicolas reflected, the struggle progressed, and he resented it, hungering for the waste places in which his affection for Eleanor had flowered. Then, as he read new lines in his mother's face and a fresh discontent about her eyes, he realized that the campaign was likely to reach women as a stimulant to surprised gossip, and little else. It was extraordinary what could be done with men. Even his father demonstrated it, dwelling pleasantly on Lady Mary's discovery.

"Brings the average up for this year, Nick. Awfully pretty girl. Mary says the Grantleys are archaic Southern stock. Seems her grandfather made quite a pile in tobacco."

"A vaporous fortune!" Nicolas sneered.

"So," Mr. Aldrich said, "it seems to have turned out. Have you run across Mr. Grantley?"

Nicolas's assent was for his father another recommendation of the failure's family.

"A type," Mr. Aldrich smiled, "of no possible use off a colonnaded portico with a grinning black man to hand around pewter cups adorned with mint. But the South still produces beautiful women. I haven't seen this girl's mother, but I daresay she's owed some of the credit. Did you know she's connected with the North Carolina Browns?"

Nicolas stirred.

"No; and did you ever stop to think, sir, that nine tenths of the North Carolina Browns probably have hookworm from running about barefooted?"

Mr. Aldrich stared.

"Why should I? Oh, I see. Another of your rabid social aphorisms. Suppose all painters have to have them. They need the treatment of respectable companionships just as a painter's hair needs the shears. Don't forget your companionships, Nicolas. You've shirked ever since you took your grimy studio. I'll feel safer when Janet can keep you straight."

"His mother hurried them to solid ground."

"I daresay you'll find Miss Grantley not at all sorry for such connections. They do count."

Mr. Aldrich thought so rather forcefully as he left them to

dress. Nicolas, when they were alone, turned eagerly to his mother. She was tired, discouraged; more than anything else, disapproving.

"You shouldn't have come."

"You mean," Nicolas said, "she hasn't got over her idea of hurting me by marrying me?"

"It's all too soon," she sighed. "A moment ago you nearly gave it away to your father."

"Why not?" he asked, "while the North Carolina Browns fill his mind? He'll forget about them fast enough when he hears of Eleanor's Halloran and Ashmead and Warden connections."

He studied her suspiciously.

"Mother! You're not banking on there never being any need of telling him?"

She didn't answer, and he fancied guilt in her eyes.

"Answer me, please. You're not encouraging her fear that she might pull me down?"

"I wanted to," she said softly, "but somehow I couldn't after that evening I found her in your studio. I haven't thanked you for your bravery under fire, for being my boy."

He laughed diffidently.

"I hadn't forgotten your wisdom or my promise. Even without them it couldn't have been any different, because of her. And you were frightened. Why? Have I ever forgotten a promise made to you, Mother?"

With an effort she kept her eyes on his.

"No more," she answered slowly at last, "than I've ever forgotten one made to you."

She raised her hands timidly in a gesture of benediction. As best she could she was blessing the woman he had chosen.

Even after that his mother wouldn't do anything for him, nor, when he telephoned, would the Morleys. Mary scolded him for having come too precipitately home, and she wouldn't tell Eleanor he craved to speak to her.

"Then I'll come up——"

"No use," she interrupted triumphantly, "for we're leaving to dine now, and afterward to frivol the evening dancing."

"Eleanor, too?" he asked.

"Why not?"

"Because," he said testily, "I haven't asked to have her stuffed down people's throats."

Her voice was impertinent.

"Seems to me you haven't much of anything to do with it."

"I will to-morrow," he threatened.

For to-night, at any rate, he was beaten; and when Driggs Wandel dropped in after dinner and carried him off to a dance at the Goodhues' he was glad to be diverted. It was possible, moreover, to talk to Driggs about the only subject that interested him. Wandel, however, like everyone else, sought to dodge.

"One hears enough about her."

"Bad as well as good, I daresay," Nicolas said disgustedly. "I wish they wouldn't try to force her on relations and friends. I'll wager she doesn't care for it any more than I do."

"You're an inconsistent Nick," Wandel drawled. "I merely venture to suggest that when custom banks the fires it will be pleasant to realize this particular campaign was waged."

He couldn't be made to speak of Eleanor Grantley again until they were at the Goodhues'; and Nicolas blamed himself for not remembering that Driggs had once seemed to want her too sincerely himself. Standing just within the ballroom, indeed, his eyes abstracted, his face quite serious, Wandel came back to her from that very angle.

"I often envy you, Nicolas, a great amount."

"Were you really in earnest, little man?"

But Wandel had questions of his own.

"Did you ever give me a real chance to find out? Did you ever leave me any doubt as to which one of us had swallowed more greedily the advice of that great self-made man?"

Suddenly Nicolas knew and was glad.

"You meant me to take that advice, Driggs. You began it

yourself in Key West. You tried to open my eyes. You thought such a marriage all right."

"I had amends to make," Wandel jeered. "Since I'd done her out of one match perhaps I felt I'd better give her a chance at a better one."

"Shut up," Nicolas smiled.

"You're right," Wandel said. "It's not a matter for jest. In my own defense I'll admit I'd never dreamed her real quality until that rotten night when she made me see it after I'd tried to treat her like an adventuress."

There was, Nicolas fancied, a reminiscent sorrow in Wandel's eyes.

"What are you staring at, Driggs?"

"It seems," Wandel yawned, "I occupy your attention too selfishly."

Nicolas followed the steady, absorbed gaze, and blamed himself for not having guessed earlier what had drawn it. He, too, stared, his heart pounding, swept by a surprise strong enough to border on disbelief. Eleanor Grantley stood at the other end of the ballroom, at Jack Berry's side, waiting for the orchestra to resume playing. He had never fancied her quite like this, and he didn't believe it was to his and Driggs's eyes alone that she was the most compelling figure in the room. He knew, moreover, that it wasn't altogether Lady Mary's fault or Beau Ashmead's that she was. She had always, he reflected, had this knack of appearing really at home in her surroundings; if you came to that, an integral part of her background, and in those days she had had insufficient means. Now every device had clearly been at hand for her skill. She had consequently achieved brilliancy in this sparkling room by fitting her beauty with a subtle consonance in the glamour of its setting.

Nicolas saw that other people had observed her success—men, particularly, who crowded about her now—and he felt shut out, this time consciously jealous. But he caught the younger women looking on with a disapproving surprise, and the older ones gathering in sibilant clusters. They made him angry for Eleanor Grantley; placed him for the first time on Lady Mary's

side. With a muttered excuse to Driggs he started across the room. Why hadn't he dreamed of her being here? Why hadn't Mary told him?

She, he saw before he reached her, hadn't known he was back. Her eyes watched his approach unsteadily. She greeted him with a flushed excitement.

"Come," he said; and, as the music started, led her out of the disappointed group.

Through rooms scattered with people he hurried her, seeking seclusion.

"Why does everyone try to keep us apart?" he asked angrily. "I telephoned to-night. They wouldn't let me talk to you. They wouldn't say I could see you here."

"I think," she murmured, "they wanted to make me want you more, as if they could."

"Where shall we go, Eleanor?"

"Anywhere, Nicolas," she answered happily, "as long as I'm with you."

He peered in the conservatory. It was empty. Behind trailing vines a bench was placed on the border of a fountain. As he led her there he knew she was right. They had kept them apart to make her want him enough to abandon her fond selflessness. He sat down, asking himself if he had destroyed all that friendly effort; if he had come back too soon. Her beauty, her capability, her brilliancy, convinced him of her unreasonableness.

"Talk about pulling me down!" he grumbled. "It's you I wish to pull down. I don't want you with these people, or any people for awhile. I want you to myself."

She looked away.

"You're going back to that? You'll never forget it?"

He studied her moodily, answering with resolution:

"I never can if you don't marry me. Listen, Eleanor. Seeing you to night has made up my mind. Unless you marry me I can't go on meeting you; I'm scarcely so superhuman. I'm off right away—back to Paris, an attic over a garden, and work."

She turned to him, frightened.

"You're not going without me, Nicolas!"

"That's it," he urged nervously. "Come with me—away from New York, from people who want too much of you. Share with me such delightful slums."

"Yes, yes, but——"

He stood up.

"No conditions. As my wife."

In her restless eyes, her drooping shoulders, her hands half reaching for his, he read her helplessness to avoid surrender. He sat again, and drew her to him, and he experienced a sense of complete welcome, a death of resistance.

"Since you were going away; since it isn't I that makes you a deserter—I know I can't let you go alone."

"A deserter!" he laughed. "A conqueror of new worlds. Why won't you look at me?"

"Because," she said slowly, "I'm thinking of what you said once about the road I've been travelling."

"What has that to do with it?" he asked.

"I've come to the end of the road," she said, "and I feel a cheat."

"Why should you, Eleanor?"

Impulsively she placed her hands in his. Frankly she offered her lips.

"Because, dear, I've not been honest with you or myself. I know now at the bottom of my heart I've never really wanted to be anywhere else."

THE END

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